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Fiction, English

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Barrett





# Some Press Opinions

OF WORKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

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## A SOLDIER'S LOVE.

**The Star.**—"The love interest is as pretty as any that was ever penned of those delightful old-fashioned times. But we would meet again de Bouffleurs, that merry little man who could not resist a fight."

**The Dundee Advertiser.**—"A fascinating tale teeming with adventures and feats of swordsmanship. The author's style is elegant and his story graphic. A novel that can be heartily recommended."

**The Methodist Recorder.**—"A fine story of adventure. The breezy freshness and 'go' of the romance render it very attractive."

**The Daily Express.**—"All lovers of historical romance will welcome 'A Soldier's Love.' A military romance of the seventeenth century."

**Lloyd's News.**—"Mr. Wilson-Barrett promises to be as eminent a writer of fiction as his father was an actor. A book with many fine moments in it, and certainly the best novel of its kind published for a long time past."

**The Dundee Courier.**—"One of the most entertaining novels of the season."

**The Irish Times.**—"A perfectly delightful story, dealing with the exciting period in England when the Stuart King, James II., was living in exile. The characters are drawn in a most spirited style."

**The Birmingham Post.**—"The author has produced a highly entertaining and romantic novel of a wholesome and pleasant type."

## THE FRENCH MASTER.

**The Klag.**—"The French master is a foreign Prince, in disguise, who murders his beautiful young wife, and saddles the murder on her equally beautiful but much more interesting sister. The efforts of Lawrence Ensor to prove the innocence of this young lady, who is incidentally his wife, will doubtless be followed with breathless interest. The book is well written, bright, and eminently readable."

**The Liverpool Courier.**—"Mr. Barrett tells in an attractive manner a capital story. Interest is maintained from first page to last, and the characters are all drawn with a powerful hand."

**The Yorkshire Post.**—"A thoroughly exciting and ingeniously constructed story."

## THE SILVER PIN.

**The Sheffield Telegraph.**—"The author has hit upon an ingenious idea of making one person commit a crime while circumstances lead two innocent people to suspect each other. The actual facts are cleverly hidden until the story has run its course."

**The Belfast Northern Whig.**—"The interest is kept at a white-hot state from find to finish."

**The Financial Times.**—"Mr. Wilson-Barrett has a good story to tell, and tells it in a way that does not allow attention to flag from start to finish."

**The Dundee Courier.**—"A skilfully wrought out novel, and will prove deeply interesting."

**The Morning Post.**—"Mr. Wilson-Barrett has taken his place among the very small band of writers who turn out really interesting fiction."

**The Liverpool Courier.**—"A capital story. The plot is centred round a murder, and the thrilling adventures which befall an amateur detective are told with great power. How the murderer is brought to justice and the amateur detective rewarded is cleverly worked out, and the interest of the reader is sustained to the last chapter."

## THE MAN WITH THE OPALS.

**The Glasgow Herald.**—"For readers who like tales of adventure and hair-breadth escape from difficulty and danger, accompanied here and there by a touch of sentiment, this is the book. From the time when the opals are lost till the day when they are found again the excitement never dies down."

**The Sheffield Telegraph.**—"Everyone who hears of or sees the unlucky gems is smitten by their strange fascination; and one man after another goes flying across the globe in search of the hidden treasure. Incident follows incident in rapid succession. A lively tale, and will be enjoyed by all."

**The Dublin Daily Express.**—"A quickly moving story of thrilling adventure, which is of unflagging interest, for there is not a dull moment throughout the narrative."

**The Leeds Mercury.**—"The adventures of the rightful owners in tracking the jewels form an exciting narrative."

**The Nottingham Guardian.**—"A story of adventure which runs with an irresistible dash, and provides surprises on almost every page."

**The Tribune.**—"An extremely readable romance, the narrative moves briskly, and the interest is well sustained."

**The Court Journal.**—"A story of exciting motive and well maintained interest. The anticipation of adventure is quickly fulfilled, and the interest is well sustained, with a full measure of resource, to the conclusion of the book."

## **THE HOUSE OVER THE WAY**

7 Fiction, English

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Barr



"Without even rising from his chair he swung round and faced me." (Page 267.)

*The House over the Way]*

*[Frontispiece*

# THE HOUSE OVER THE WAY

BY  
ALFRED WILSON-BARRETT

AUTHOR OF  
"THE GOLDEN LOTUS," "A SOLDIER'S LOVE,"  
"THE SILVER PIN," ETC.

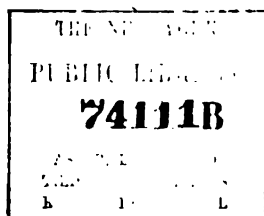
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# THE HOUSE OVER THE WAY

## CHAPTER I

**M**Y mind is made up ; my decision is taken, and it is irrevocable ; I shall not accept Mr. Prothero's managership, and I shall not go to Ceylon.

My kind old friend's offer was a good one ; it was even brilliant, but what do I know of tea-planting, or managing estates, and what should I do, in that *galère* ! I have five hundred a year of my own, and I love England, I love the country, the English country, at this time of year when the winter is just beginning to yield to gentle pressure from the spring. I dislike travel ; I am not even sure that I am ambitious. This is my native soil ; to uproot me, to transplant me, would be as disagreeable, perhaps even as fatal to me as to one of those snowdrops just forcing their way out of the still frozen earth ; or to be more appropriate, let us say one of those solemn little fir-trees yonder, which would appreciate the

## 8 THE HOUSE OVER THE WAY

burning sun of Colombo, I am sure, as little as I, myself.

"You are young, you are healthy!" said Mr. Prothero. "A good-looking fellow like you should not be satisfied to spend your youth dreaming life away in a little country town. The whole world lies open before you; you are free and independent; go out and join the fight."

Yes! I am young and strong enough. Yes! I am free—I haven't a relation in the world I ever see, or who cares a jot where I go—but why should I join that fight he talks of; that struggle which to a casual observer like myself seems to afford so little pleasure to the combatants who wage it. Why should I give up my comfortable little house, my cob, my dogs, my modest literary tasks which some day I may spring upon that uncertain animal the world, to be bitten by mosquitoes in a bungalow and bull-drive the patient Cingalese.

And yet what a humbug I am. Wasn't I already wearying of my even uneventful life; wasn't dear old Mr. Prothero's arrival an oasis in a thirsty desert; didn't his offer open new and enticing fields to a lonely man; wasn't I already thinking seriously of cutting adrift from the old quiet life—until a week ago.

Until a week ago. Yes ! what a humbug I am. A week ago I should have gone. Now I can't ! Why ? I hardly dare ask myself. It seems so strange, so impossible, that in such a short space of time so much could have happened ; and yet to anyone but me, what is it after all.

Under the window where I write, against the wall which catches all the early sun, is a little patch of bare brown earth. In this spot, within the past few days, there has appeared and flowered one single premature and yellow crocus. For many months, during the long winter, my eye has caught that patch of earth, and wandered from it without interest to some other object ; now it rests on it with pleasure. A flower has come into its existence. Why have I changed so within the last few days ? a flower has come into my life too.

A flower, yes, for what could better describe " her," and the sense of something fresh and sweet and lovely which surrounds her.

Mr. Prothero talks about my living in a country town ; to be truthful I live outside one. With the exception of the house over the way there is not a building within a quarter of a mile. The road is not a wide one, and we face one another across it. Why

## 10 THE HOUSE OVER THE WAY

these two houses should be placed thus so close to each other, and so far from the rest of the little town, I know not. Probably my grandfather to whom both belonged built the second for some friend or relative whom he desired to visit often. At all events there we are, and the house over the way and its life are all of human existence which I can see from my windows ; the rest is pure landscape.

Until a few days ago the house over the way had been empty. It was therefore with interest one morning that I saw carts with luggage and furniture arrive and workmen commence operations which showed me that " The Elms " was let again, and that the new tenants were about to take possession.

They arrived one afternoon ; a middle-aged man of portly presence and a young girl. I was at my window when they drove up in a brougham, drawn by a pair of fine horses. The man I had a good view of ; he was about fifty-two or three, handsome in a way, but very stout, with a jolly round face and reddish grey hair ; the picture of a successful business man, I should have said. The girl I hardly caught sight of then. Light, slim and graceful, she stepped quickly from the carriage and entered the house, leaving in my mind only a pleasant impression of something fresh and

## THE HOUSE OVER THE WAY II

lovely ; but no distinct recollection of her face or figure.

It was not until two days after that I saw them again, and meanwhile I had learnt something concerning my new neighbours.

The new tenant of The Elms is a Mr. Dunn. He is a well-known merchant in London, a man of considerable wealth and position. The young lady is his ward or step-daughter, report cannot decide which—and is herself very rich. The two are greatly attached to one another, and of late Mr. Dunn has rather relaxed a life-long devotion to business in order to give up his time to his companion. Her name is Grey.

I shall not forget the first time I saw Miss Grey, for I do not count my one brief glimpse of her on her arrival.

I had been into Windleton on business, and was returning home about an hour before lunch. It was a lovely morning, almost spring like ; and the first sweet smell of the reviving earth was in the air. Between Windleton and my home the road, here only narrow and unfrequented, is bordered by trees, and has a park-like and secluded air.

As I turned a corner not far from home, down the road before me, between the elms came a man and a woman. Strangers are

rare in the neighbourhood of Windleton, and I was not long in concluding that the couple before me were the new tenants of the house over the way.

They were walking arm in arm as they came in sight, and they did not relinquish their affectionate attitude on drawing near. Both looked up with evident interest as I passed, however, and I fancied even spoke of me later in a tone too low of course to catch my ears.

How to describe the impression they made on me, the effect that meeting had upon my mind. A nearer view only confirmed my first ideas of Mr. Dunn. I realized however that there was more power, more of a reserved and settled air of purpose in his round jovial features than I had at first suspected. He has all the appearance of the most turtle-eating alderman, with beneath it, unless I am much mistaken, a great deal of the stern determination which raised Sir Richard Whittington so much above his fellows. I hear also, by the way, that it depended and perhaps still depends only on himself whether he will follow in that long lamented gentleman's footsteps, and be, at least once, Lord Mayor of London. So may it be.

And Miss Grey, what am I to say of her? I think the first thing which struck me was the



contrast between her and the companion upon whose arm she leant so willingly. He, stout, massive, imposing, his jovial face red and shining, his big limbs planting his feet firmly at each step, mastering the earth as it were, and holding it captive, his air erect and confident ; . . . she . . . I likened her to a flower not long ago, and indeed it is as a flower that I have thought of her since that first spring morning. What could be more flower-like than that slender figure bent gracefully towards her companion, that beautifully shaped and golden head, those deep dark eyes looking out on the world unconscious of their beauty . . . were they unconscious ? or was there the faintest touch of gentle amusement at my uncouth open-mouthed admiration in their almost violet depths, as they met mine. I know not ; I can see them now as if I were but this minute looking into them, but they dazzle me, and I cannot tell. I only remember that I stood gazing after the couple when they had long since turned the corner into Windleton, and that when at last I seemed able to think at all coherently I found myself at home in my study looking into the windows of their house and thanking heaven that my grandfather had placed it where he did.

## CHAPTER II

**I** SAW nothing of Miss Grey or Mr. Dunn the next day, and, the morning after, the latter went up to town on business. I spent the afternoon aimlessly wandering about. I disguised it from myself at the time, but now I know that my hope was to meet my lovely neighbour again, and to obtain a second view of that beauty which on its first acquaintance had so impressed me.

I met with little success for a long time, however, and it was only towards evening that chance gave the occasion I sought.

I had strolled through the little wood not far from my house, and was making my way home across a couple of fields which lie between its outskirts and the main road, when I heard the sound of a horse's hoofs at a canter behind me.

I was a few steps from a gateway at the time, and seeing that the equestrian was a lady, I hastened my pace slightly to lift the hurdle which barred the road, and allow her to pass.

A quick voice stopped me. "Please don't," it said, and the next moment the speaker, mounted on a well-bred grey cob, had flown the timber and landed safely on the other side.

I caught a glimpse of the rider's fair hair and dark eyes as she swayed easily to the leap, and recognized her at once. It was Miss Grey.

She slackened speed in the next field, and, walking faster than the cob, I came up with her as she turned into the road.

An ominous click-clack had warned me that something had gone wrong, and as I approached her I saw that she was looking anxiously over her cob's withers and that one of the animal's shoes was loose and hanging by only a couple of nails.

"May I help?" I asked coming up to her side. "That shoe won't last till you reach home in any case, and it may be dangerous as it is!"

She looked a little doubtfully from my clean gloves to the muddy shoe.

"Thank you," she said, "It is very kind of you. Perhaps it would be better off. Take care that Herne doesn't kick. He is not always pleasant to strangers."

The shoe was tighter than I had thought,

but it was off at last, at the cost of a torn glove ; and she thanked me with a pretty smile and glance. I dodged the cob's forefoot which he struck out viciously at me as I rose, with a face rather red from my exertions, and looked at the shoe.

" It is quite a good shoe still," I said, " and can easily be replaced. Will you carry it home on your saddle, or . . . or, may I keep it for luck ? "

She smiled. " It is a very poor exchange for your ruined glove ! " she said. " But if you are superstitious, I don't suppose Herne will object to your keeping his shoe."

I resented the insinuation that the gift came from Herne, especially after his late attack upon my life, but I was delighted with the success of my request, and I suppose my pleasure showed in my eyes, for with a little bow she dug her heel into the cob's side and, starting off, closed the conversation.

" Her voice is as sweet as her face," I thought, as I turned homewards, " and if there is anything in a very ancient superstition, what an auspicious commencement to our acquaintance. Herne, my friend, your shoe shall take its place among my most cherished possessions. Thanks to you, I have spoken to your mistress."

"There is a delightful custom in the country which permits residents to call first upon new-comers ; I shall avail myself of my privilege to-morrow and *you* shall make a topic of conversation to commence with. What a lovely day, and what a nice place Windleton has suddenly become ! "

Herne was out of sight long before I had finished my soliloquy, but his shoe remained a silent witness to my adventure, and wrapping my torn glove round it, I made my way home.

\* \* \* \*

Mr. Dunn returned from town the next morning, and in the afternoon I walked across the road to pay my first call at the house over the way.

I was shown in by an ancient butler, who informed me that both Mr. Dunn and Miss Grey were at home. As I made my way to the drawing room, and during the few moments I sat there awaiting my host, I could not help being struck by the evidence of great wealth which met my gaze on every side. The house was naturally a fine one and very different from my own modest home, though so nearly neighbouring ; yet I could not help seeing at once that it was entirely inadequate to the display of the treasures it now contained.

Furnished with great taste and without

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ostentation, it was apparent to the most unobserving eye that everything the rooms held was the best of its kind, from the pictures on the walls, several of which I already knew by name, to the thick carpets on the floor, into which one's feet sank luxuriously and which matched so perfectly with the soft tints of the walls and ceilings.

My attention was, however, soon attracted from the many treasures around me to a small miniature of Miss Grey which stood on the grand piano near one of the windows, and I was engaged in examining this when the door opened.

I reddened for some absurd reason, and was about to hastily put back the miniature, when I saw that it was too late, for Mr. Dunn stood beside me.

"You are looking at that frame?" he said to me, after we had introduced ourselves, and he had welcomed me heartily. "It is a beautiful thing, is it not? I bought it at William West's, the great financier's, sale. It contained a portrait of his wife, and was found on his heart after he shot himself. That is not Mrs. West of course; it is my ward, Miss Grey."

Intent on the picture it contained, I had not noticed the frame until he called my attention

to it, but his remark relieved me from my temporary embarrassment, and when I came to look closer I saw that the portrait had indeed a worthy mounting. It was an exquisite oval of antique silver and ivory, beautifully worked, probably by Eastern hands, and ornamented alternately with pink and white pearls of considerable value.

Mr. Dunn took the frame from my hands as I relinquished it and placed it carefully again upon the piano, giving, as I could not help noticing, a loving glance at the sweet face which smiled back at him from the ivory. Then he turned to me and began to talk easily and naturally about the neighbourhood and its doings, and of my own life and plans, until I found myself coming out of my shell and chatting as freely as if I had known him all my life.

The pleasant thread was not broken by the entrance a little later of Miss Grey, whose manner was as easy and charming as I had found her guardian's. We were soon all three upon the best of terms. So much so indeed that I prolonged my visit far beyond the limits of an ordinary call, and when I at last passed out of the front door I noticed with dismay that it was more than an hour since my first arrival.

## 20 THE HOUSE OVER THE WAY

One thing certain is that Mr. Dunn is devoted to his lovely ward. He humours her, defers to her, lives, I should say, for her alone. His eyes are constantly watching her, and once I caught a look that was almost fierce in its intense affection pass across his ordinary red and jolly face. It was when she joked him about leaving him to pay a long-promised visit to a school friend, I remember; I also remember that I heartily sympathized with him at the time, though I hope my feelings did not show so plainly upon my features.

And how could anyone who knows her and lives with her help loving her, the type of all that is best worth loving in frank, sweet girlhood ! who could resist the fascination of that rich low voice, those dangerous dark eyes, now merry, now dreaming, now flashing bright and challenging into one's own ; that contrast so exquisitely with the braids of her golden hair, and the pure white curves of her lovely face. Not Mr. Dunn, it is evident ; not I, for my pen runs away with me as I write, and I must stop or I shall descend to drivelling. Yet why should one be ashamed to rave of beauty when one meets it and one is young and a man. What is there in this world worth it after all ; what are we promised better in the next ?



I have met Miss Grey several times since that first day—do I ever go out, do I exist without the hope of seeing her ? and I thank Heaven that I have been so far blessed that I *have* seen and talked with her. Though I should never do more than touch her hand, and what wild dream could give me the hope of more, though I should never even look on her face again, I say, thank Heaven at least that I have met her, and that life can never be entirely the same again.

And so Mr. Prothero, for “good or evil, for better or for worse,” your offer is declined with thanks. Colombo is not for me ; my heart has taken root much nearer home. One short week has witnessed a change in my life which a week ago I should have thought incredible.

Bah ! my old friend, tell me why should I cross the seas when from my chair, as I write even now, I can watch the front door of the house over the way ?

### CHAPTER III

**I** HAVE made great progress in my intimacy with my new neighbours at "The Elms" thanks to a little diplomacy and the many facilities for improving an acquaintance which a country life affords.

Fortunately I get on very well with Mr. Dunn. He is indeed a charming neighbour ; jovial, good-hearted, yet withal a keen, shrewd business man ; he wins at once one's liking and respect. As regards the neighbourhood, and particularly the little town of Windleton, he has sprung in an instant to a height of popularity almost unheard of in its annals. To this, of course, his great wealth and the generous use he makes of it has contributed ; though I am afraid the townspeople rather presume upon his kindness. What his short stay here must have already cost him I dread to think.

To my own knowledge he has given largely to the Hospital, to the Church, to the Cricket Club, to the Library and Sewing class, and to several deserving private charities. He could

not have done more had he intended to stand for the division. I am sure he might at least be Mayor of Windleton on a very short notice if he so desired.

But he seems to have no wish for personal aggrandisement in all this well doing. He lives a quiet, almost secluded life, going to town twice or thrice a week on business, but spending the rest of the time walking in the lanes with his ward, pottering about his green-houses, or looking after a certain breed of fowls in which he takes a particular interest.

When she is not with Mr. Dunn, or when he goes to town, Miss Grey amuses herself by exploring the country on Herne, whose full name I have discovered to be "Herne the Hunter."

Thanks to a faculty for discerning the sound of Herne's hoofs from a distance, and a certain amount of patience in awaiting opportunities, it often happens that I meet Miss Grey after her expeditions and accompany her home. She is kindness itself to me, and never seems bored with my companionship, she who has lived in such much more brilliant circles than I can ever hope to reach. For Mr. Dunn, I realize more every day, is a power in the world of London finance, and to such all doors in this country are open.

But she no more than he seems to care for the glitter of a wider life. She loves the country, she loves nature and every kind of animal that walks or runs, and on that point, as on others, we agree perfectly. She is a splendid horsewoman ; I am not an indifferent cavalier, and between riders there is always a bond of sympathy, and it was this perhaps which first put us at our ease. But that is by no means all. She is not the least the usual type of sporting country girl. With a charming natural gaiety and quick sense of humour, she has a keen sensitiveness to the deeper things of life and a literary taste which makes her know and appreciate the best.

If nothing else, I feel I have written better—in my humble pottering way—since I knew her. She has almost made me hope that under the influence of companionship with her I may, one day, do something to justify the idle life she has made me conscious that I lead.

There is hardly a day now when I do not see her, hardly one when I do not speak to her. How long will the dream last, and when it ends, as end it must, what will be the awakening. I do not blind myself to the fact that in all probability it will be sad for me. Wealthy, beautiful as she is I could

never be a match for her even if . . . even if she cared for me, and what right have I to hope she ever could ?

Mr. Dunn has, with his usual kindness, offered later to put me into the way of doubling my small capital. Mr. West, the Mayor of Windleton, has already achieved quite a small fortune through him, and even Mr. Cox, the Vicar, I hear has made some good investments of his slender means. But my capital, doubled even, would bring me little nearer the sum which I could hope might make a man of Mr. Dunn's wealth listen to my views. Heaven knows for myself I don't want money, and doubt if I should take the trouble to transfer my stocks even on the security of my neighbour's valuable judgment ; but for her sake how greedy I have become of late !

Not that she cares herself for money, I am sure ; never was there a woman who worshipped wealth and the things it can obtain less than she does. She is so simple, so unaffected, of such a sunny temperament that I am certain she does not realize nor appreciate half the advantages her position brings her. A wandering hedgehog, the quick scuttle of a rabbit across the path, a glowing sunset, a first cluster of spring violets are more to her than all the luxuries of London.

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I shall never write that word sunset, or think of one, without recalling an hour I spent with her.

For once my spirit of divination had disappointed me ; for once in all our accustomed rides I had failed to hear Herne's jaunty footfall or catch a glimpse of the sleek grey back and flat clean legs that bear so well the figure I long to see. I had spent the afternoon in a vain research, and coming to the conclusion that the day was wasted, I was returning homewards rather melancholy. My path lay through the heart of a wood. All around me the trunks of the beech and elm trees of which it was composed rose bare and knotted, the branches even at their outermost tips giving no trace as yet of spring greenness, but the undergrowth in places was still verdant, and my horse's feet fell softly on a carpet of thick moss.

Turning a corner I came suddenly upon a little clearing, and wondering at my mount's pricked ears and quickened pace I looked about me. And my heart beat fast. For there seated on a fallen tree, her back turned to me, with Herne nibbling the moss at her side, was Miss Grey. I had a moment before she turned, to admire the slight graceful figure in its neat grey habit, the exquisite

curve of the golden head, and then she saw me.

She was glad ; the little flush on her cheek, and her smile told me that ; but her eyes wore still a dreamy look and I saw that her thoughts had been far away.

I knew my horse would not stray far from Herne, and, leaving its bridle to trail, I took a seat by her side upon the fallen tree. For a moment we sat silent, and then " Isn't it perfect ? " she said. I followed the direction of her gaze. In front of us through the bare trunks of the trees the sunset could be seen tinting the horizon with vivid pink and purple. At the edge of the wood the ground sank suddenly, descending steeply to the wide cultivated valley which lay between us and the hills opposite, beneath whose tops the sun was already commencing to dip. The many-coloured rays struck here and there, now catching the roof of some distant house and making it flame ; now crimsoning the bark of the huge beeches round us, or turning the moss at our feet into a gold and purple carpet.

I was about to speak, when suddenly Miss Grey's hand flew to my arm, and pressed it tightly. " Don't move, " she said quickly, and in a whisper ; " oh, please don't move. "

Startled I stared at her, and then from her

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to a little carpet of moss and fern not twenty yards away, and then I understood. It was alive with rabbits. Not one or two, but twenty white-tailed, long-eared creatures gambolled or crouched motionless half hidden by the ferns, while here and there sat one erect upon its haunches with pricked ears and sniffing nostrils, sentinel for the rest.

Miss Grey's eyes were sparkling with delight, and as I looked at her parted lips and cheeks flushed with excitement, and felt her little hand light yet firm as steel upon my arm, I blessed those innocent rodents, so careless of our presence, and prayed that they might continue their gambols far into the dusk.

Life may or may not be worth living, but there are moments in it which compensate for years of dullness or discontent, and this was one of them for me ; I seemed to live for ages in a blissful dream where she and I were alone in the world, Adam and Eve, innocent, happy with nature and her children for our friends. And as her little hand grew warmer on my arm and her breath crossed my cheek, I felt my heart beat quickly and my pulses throb. A wild desire to sink on my knees at her feet, to press my lips to the hem of her skirt, to the ground she trod upon, almost overpowered me ; words rose to my lips, passionate yet



humble, that should express my thoughts, tell her how I loved her, worshipped her, and charm her to share the happiness she gave.

Should I have been so mad ; and what, ah, what would she have said ! I know not, I dare not guess. A sudden stamp of Herne's iron-shod hoof, a rattle and jingle of my horse's bit and bridle, and the charm was shattered. There was a scamper and scuttle from the moss and ferns ; a gleam of white tails and flying brown came and disappeared ; Miss Grey flushed and removed her hand from my arm and rose quickly to her feet. I sighed and reached for Herne's bridle, and, mounting, we rode home. The dream was over.

She was laughing, frank and gay as I had always known her, as our horses trotted side by side or picked their way in single file over the rough parts of the road ; she was charming, but she was as unapproachable, as indifferent, as calm, as if I had been the labourer whom we passed tramping homewards to his supper, or the village postman who touched his hat and stopped his brisk walk to let us pass.

It was only when I left her at her door and turned my horse's head towards his stable that she waved her little hand to me with a more friendly gesture than I had ever won

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from her before, and the gleam in her dark eyes and red lips curved into a smile seemed to flash upon me that she knew perfectly the danger she had escaped and yet bore me no malice for it.

## CHAPTER IV

**I** AM the most unfortunate man that ever existed. I have contrived in some way to offend Mr. Dunn ; and his hospitable house from this moment is practically closed to me.

How has it all come about ? I can hardly even guess. For some time I had fancied that his manner was changed towards me, but as he had also been looking rather anxious and worried, I merely put the fact down to business anxieties inseparable from such big interests as he controls, and thought little of it. Now I am sure he no longer likes me.

Tracing back, recalling step by step the progress of our acquaintance from its first genial commencement to its later almost daily intimacy, the change in his manner seems to date from the day which I have described in the last chapter, when I first perhaps realized how fully my heart was pledged to Miss Grey. Certainly it was on the following morning that I noticed a slight coolness in his welcome ; and the next day

when Miss Grey and myself were walking back from Windleton, his tone, as he greeted us was quite brusque.

He had not seen us until we were close upon him. He came striding along with that heavy masterful walk of his, swinging his stick, with his eyes fixed on the ground. He was apparently meditating upon some subject which annoyed or irritated him, for his usually jolly, red face was clouded, and his full lips moved quickly as if he was talking to himself.

When he looked up, his face lighted at the sight of Miss Grey, but seeing me, his expression changed instantly ; I am sure of it. He gave me a curt nod, and telling Miss Grey coldly that he wished to speak to her, he led her off.

Can it be that he has read my heart, and objects to me as a possible applicant for the hand of his ward ? From what I know of his character that scarcely seems probable. True, I am in no way, save perhaps in that of family, a desirable *parti* for such a girl as Miss Grey ; true, he may have other and higher views for her ; but I am not such an absolute cipher that he should object to my talking to her, or reject me before I have even declared myself a suitor.

However, there is no doubt whatever that I am no longer a person whose acquaintance he desires. Whatever theories I may have formed on that subject from his manner on the occasion I have reported, are absolutely confirmed by an incident of the other day.

As I have mentioned, he has a particular breed of fowls of which he is very proud. Yesterday morning my gardener came to me bearing a very crumpled-looking chicken which it appeared my fox-terrier "Jack" had chased, captured and carried off from Mr. Dunn's domain. The bird was not very seriously damaged, but the affair was bad enough; so after smoothing its rumpled feathers to the best of my ability, I sent it with a note full of the most humble apologies back to The Elms.

As no reply came during the day, and I knew that Mr. Dunn was at home, I walked across the road, towards evening, with the intention of making my peace in person.

It struck me at once that the face of Jennings, the old butler with whom I was now on the most friendly terms, did not beam with its usual expression of delight, and when he informed me that Mr. Dunn was very busy and that he feared I should not be received, I felt that the affair looked serious.

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"If you will kindly step into the small drawing room, however, sir," said Jennings, doubtfully, "I will tell Mr. Dunn you are here."

He was some time gone, and when he returned, he carried a note in his hand. It was from Mr. Dunn. It was written in the curtest terms, practically ignored my apology, and wound up with the expression of the opinion that vicious brutes like "Jack" should either be poisoned or their owners prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

Poor old Jennings' face was quite a study as he watched me read the note. I saw he realized that I was in disgrace, and for a moment, as I crumpled the paper in my hands, we stood staring at one another in dismay.

"Can I see Miss Grey for a moment, Jennings," I asked, at length.

His face grew still more downcast. "Well, really, sir," he murmured apologetically, "I don't know as how you could. The young lady ain't left her room since . . . not since this morning. No, I am afraid you couldn't see her, Mr. Blackwood, sir."

The following morning Mr. Dunn practically cut me when I met him in the road,

and Miss Grey kept to the house, for I watched the door all day.

\* \* \* \*

This morning I have been an unintentional witness of the strangest scene. Irritated by Mr. Dunn's behaviour and anxious at seeing nothing of Miss Grey, I had gone for a long ramble, my way leading me to the spot where I had last talked with the young girl, watching the sunset from the fallen tree.

I stood for a second looking round me as I realized where I was, but the place without her had lost its charm, and walking on I took a little path which led through brushwood and thick undergrowth into the deepest shadows of the wood. Continuing this path for some distance I came at last to a little clearing where stood a game-keeper's hut.

I strolled up to the building, giving a glance in at the window as I passed, but it was evident that the place was empty, and I was already about to continue my road when I fancied that I heard something move, inside. I must have been mistaken, or some rat or other animal had caused the sound, for when I opened the door and looked around me, I saw that the single chamber of which the hut consisted was bare and unoccupied.

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There were several skins drying on the table, however, and I took one of these to the window to examine it more closely. As I did so, something caught my eye in the wood outside, and dropping the skin I stood looking through the dusty unwashed glass.

The window gave on to the side opposite to that from which I had come. In the far corner of the clearing was a pile of faggots and old logs, and on these were seated a man and a woman. They were facing me, and my heart beat fast as I recognized Mr. Dunn and Miss Grey.

They were some distance from me, but I could see that they were in earnest conversation and I could catch the expression of their faces : Miss Grey's pale and rather disturbed, Mr. Dunn's flushed and eager ; and as I watched I wondered involuntarily what could be the subject which interested them so much.

Perhaps I should not have continued to stand there at the window watching unobserved that lovely face which meant so much to me ; certainly I should have been happier, more at peace in my mind had I left the hut and continued my lonely walk ; but I could not. I had not seen her for so long that I had not the heart to leave without one look



at her ; and while I looked an incident occurred which made me forget myself and stand wondering.

Miss Grey had risen suddenly as if to go, but as she rose Mr. Dunn rose too and caught her hand. She resisted and attempted to draw her fingers from his grasp, but he held them tight, and, kissing them, he flung himself on his knees at her feet.

Amazed as I was, every movement of the actors in this scene yet imprinted itself on my mind. I can see them now as plainly as I saw them then : Miss Grey, pale and trembling ; her guardian kneeling, holding her hand, now kissing it, now pressing it between his big red palms, his face turned up to hers imploringly.

Had it not been for his intense earnestness there would have been something ridiculous in the sight of this big fat creature sprawling thus upon the grass at the feet of a young girl. But a glance at his face took from me all desire to smile and, rather, struck chill to my heart, so fierce were the passions written there, so evident was it that life and death hung for him upon the lips his upturned eyes watched so fiercely.

For a second it seemed Miss Grey was about to yield ; then suddenly, snatching her hand

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away with a force of which she did not seem capable, she turned and hurried from the spot. If Mr. Dunn had seemed agitated before, his face was now painful to look upon. I never saw features express so plainly consternation and despair ; and he stood for a moment gazing after the young girl, and looking completely overwhelmed.

Doubtful of the effect of such emotion upon a man of his physique, and fearing that he might end by having a fit of some kind, I was about to leave the hut and go to his assistance, when, making a visible effort, he pulled himself together and hurried with uncertain steps in the direction Miss Grey had taken.

With my mind agitated by what I had seen, I felt little inclination to continue my walk, and taking a path different from that by which Mr. Dunn and his ward had gone, I made my way home.

What did it mean, that scene ? I asked myself, yet can I doubt ? Here is the explanation of Mr. Dunn's strange conduct towards myself, surely, here is the secret of his life. He loves Miss Grey. Jealous of my friendship for her, fearful that I or some other and younger rival may win her, he has risked all—and lost. For I felt I could read every meaning of the episode which I had watched : the

fierce emotion, the discouragement, of the big red-faced, middle-aged man ; the sudden fear, the struggle between pity, affection and dismay on *her* pale face ; the trembling yet firm rejection which left him standing there alone, crushed and ashamed.

She loves him, I am sure ; she has told me so a hundred times, as she would love a man who has been more than a father to her. But in that way ? How could he imagine it ; how could he have been so blind !

This has upset and made me anxious. What will happen ? What effect will it all have upon my fortunes ? Will she continue to live with him ; or is this new happiness which has come into my life to cease almost before it has commenced ?

## CHAPTER V

**M**Y forebodings have not been realized ; nay, things are even better than I could have hoped. Miss Grey has not left The Elms, and I am reinstated in Mr. Dunn's good graces. I am even *ami de la maison*, without rival, and honest old Jennings' face beams once more.

How has this come about ? I know not ; but to the outside world there would appear to be little change in the relations of Mr. Dunn and his fair ward. It is only when I remember the scene in the wood that I notice the faintest touch of reserve in Miss Grey's always affectionate manner towards her guardian, and fancy an extra deference and humility in the eagerness with which he sets himself to carry out her wishes.

There is certainly not the least sign of jealousy or dislike in his manner towards me ; he has been as frank and friendly as he was at first, or, rather, he has been even kinder ; and there is hardly a day when I am

not pressed to dine, lunch, or go to tea at his hospitable house.

"Come, my boy, as often as you like!" he said to me, the other day, when I had attempted to excuse myself from dining at The Elms on the ground that I had lunched there the day before.

"The oftener you come, the better you will please me, and, as you know, Elsie is always glad to see you. Poor girl, this is not a very lively neighbourhood for her, I fear!"

I looked across to Miss Grey who was seated at one of the French windows at the far end of the room, engaged with some needlework, and wondered if she did indeed find life dull in the neighbourhood of Windleton.

Though most of the county families have called upon Mr. Dunn, the majority live at some distance from The Elms, and with the exception of the old clergyman, his wife, the doctor and myself, there is certainly little society, and the place could not be expected to be very amusing for a young girl. Her tastes are simple, I know, and she loves a country life, for the country itself; still, it struck me with a sudden pang that she had grown sadder and quieter lately, and the thought distressed me.

She looked up and smiled with her old gay

manner, however, as she heard her guardian's words, and her eyes met mine sweetly.

"Why, you know, I don't really care in the least for Society with a capital 'S,' Guardian," she said quickly; "and I love The Elms. I have never had a horse I cared for like Herne, and I have never enjoyed riding as I do nowadays."

I felt myself flush with pleasure here, for I had been her companion on so many of her expeditions; and she continued—

"And I love dear old Mr. Cox, and his dear old wife. And of course, Guardian, Mr. Blackwood must come to dinner. I am sure he must be in danger of going melancholy mad all alone in that great gaunt house, or of writing a blank verse tragedy, which would be almost as bad."

"Writing tragedies pays very well sometimes," said Mr. Dunn, seriously. "Though I believe comedies pay better. And that reminds me, Blackwood, my boy, I have found a very good investment for that two thousand of yours."

He led me off into his study at this point, loath as I was to leave Miss Grey, and for half an hour I listened to him, while he expounded financial operations which left me cold, and prophesied a cheerful future for

my two thousand pounds, which, to tell the truth, interested me very little. For my thoughts were much more engrossed in wondering whether the fact of my being there had made Miss Grey enjoy her rides, and whether there was any hope that she might be beginning to like me better, to see what I felt for her, and to reciprocate if ever so little.

I felt inclined to blame my lack of interest in Mr. Dunn's business chat and to accuse myself of ingratitude, when a week or so afterwards, he informed me that my two thousand pounds had changed into nearly four. He treated the affair very lightly himself, and, of course, such transactions as mine must seem very small to him ; but what a genius the man must have, who in a short time can almost double a sum like that. He assured me that if I cared to risk it for a longer time the amount would be still further increased, but I laughingly declined.

"Such a power as yours is uncanny," I said, "and I refuse to tempt providence again ; I should feel like Faust, or Peter What's-his-name who sold his shadow, and dread each morning to be called upon for my soul."

To be honest there was more in my words than my tone implied. It always seems

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impossible to me that such sums can be made, such vast fortunes raised so rapidly, without there being some little hitch somewhere, some deviation from the strict, straight line of honesty and honour. Someone must suffer ; and certainly these men themselves pay the penalty for their success, inevitably.

Though Mr. Dunn seems to have retired to a great extent from the fiercest of the battle, his interests are still immense, and, successful as he is, the strain shows plainly on him. His face looks almost haggard at times, in spite of its jovial ruddiness, and occasionally his mind seems to stray far from the subject he is conversing on.

At first I was inclined to put this down to the effects of the scene I had witnessed in the wood, but I have changed my mind since. From stray words dropped in conversation between Miss Grey and him, from various glimpses gathered by watching the two together, and for other reasons for which it is almost impossible to give any definite causes, I have come to the conclusion that Mr. Dunn's feelings are absolutely unselfish towards Miss Grey. He loves her sincerely, and is devoted to her, I am sure ; but that there is any question of himself or his happiness in the case, I do not believe.



From what I have seen I have formed a theory that he is haunted by the thought of her great wealth, and the idea that she may become the prey of some needy adventurer. If it was his name and his heart which he offered her that day in the wood, as I have imagined, it was in the hope of securing her happiness, and that alone ; and I am sure she realizes it. Indeed, would she have continued to stay with him otherwise.

Joseph Legrand, the Windleton doctor, and a great friend of mine, agrees with me about Mr. Dunn.

“Zat friend of yoursse up at The Elums will have to shut shop and retire from Beezness,” he said, with the accent which twenty years’ residence in England has not eradicated, “eef he goes on like thees. He has not any longer ze constitution for eet, and zat kind of physique never last very long under stress. If he was not a successful man—and zey tell me he don’t know what he’s worth—he would long ago have been dead. Tell ’im so from me. He don’t call me in ; he prefers a big London ’umbug to a little country one ; but I give ’im ze opinion for nussing.”

I like Joseph, though some people in the neighbourhood do not. Why he is disliked

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here and there, I hardly know. Possibly because he is something of a mystery, and country people hate mysteries. Probably because he is a Frenchman, and the distrust of a Frenchman is as much alive in rural districts as in Napoleon's day.

"What does a foreigner want to come to Windleton and be a doctor for?" they ask, and to tell the truth echo gives no reasonable answer. I myself have a theory that he came over here to study English methods, and forgot to return; for in some ways he is certainly the most absent-minded man I know.

But he is clever, too clever for some of his patients, whom he cures without their having the least idea how it is done, a thing they strongly object to. He is poor, but he apparently cares very little for money, having the frugal habits of his race. He would always rather treat a poor patient than a rich one, and a very poor rather than a poor one, and he is adored by the destitute and the stingy, for he never bothers for his bill. He is at every one's service, day or night, and when not otherwise occupied he goes careering about the country on a motor quadricycle which he bought cheap, second-hand, and which will certainly be the end of him, if not of others, before very long, for he is

the most reckless chauffeur I have ever met.

His "car," is a little low thing on four wheels. In front there is a small seat on which a passenger can be carried if there be found one rash enough to try. He himself seats his fifteen stone (he is a big fat man with a blue shave, eyeglasses covering keen twinkling black eyes, and a round swarthy face) on a sort of tricycle saddle, behind; there are pedals with which he can push the affair along, should the machinery go wrong, which, owing to his absent-mindedness, it often does; it is the most infernally noisy beast I have ever heard; and it can, and generally *does*, go at any speed up to thirty miles an hour.

I must say he drives it, as he does everything else, with a marvellous skill; but he takes, and other people in his immediate neighbourhood take, unwillingly, the most fearful risks when he is on the warpath. Rash village boys who have been offered and accepted the little front seat have appeared afterwards in their homes with wildly staring eyes and hair on end, and one old lady of not very excellent character whom he found disabled on the road, and carried home, read her Bible for three hours a day afterwards until her death, in consequence.

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Fortunately for him he is favourably known to the authorities, who look upon him as a foreigner and therefore not quite responsible, or he would have been arrested long ago.

"Zey do not stop me," he said to me one day; "for zey shink I am going on life or death. Zey shink accidents are awaiting me (they were right), and zey let me and 'teuf-teuf,' go past. Zey don't know I have no patients, only two old women and a leetle boy, and so I take my exercise in calm."

Considering a series of violent explosions, a horrible whirl and clatter, and a huge figure bounding past, bumped first to one side and then to the other, with at least one wheel always in the air, was all one usually saw and heard of him, "calm," was good; but I said nothing, for like all Frenchmen, Legrand is touchy, and, as I have mentioned, I like him very much. If I needed a friend I should go to him; and if there was any way out of the trouble, those keen eyes of his, that quick eager brain, those clever, firm hands would find it, as quickly as they diagnose the cases that neighbouring doctors with bigger names stumble over.

As Joseph said, he is never called in to The Elms. When occasion arises, which fortunately is seldom, Mr. Dunn prefers to

send to London for a doctor ; but as a neighbour the Frenchman knows the tenants of The Elms, and is a devout admirer of Miss Grey. He is never tired of talking of her, though she has only spoken to him once, and she merely smiles at him as he bounces past her, causing Herne to fling up his head and swing round in disgust, for he is Herne's *bête noir*.

" Ah, zere is one who doesn't want doctors ! " he said, as we passed her one morning. " How she is beautiful ! She is all that is best of your young girl, slim, yet strong as your English steel, riding zat wicked horse as easy—as easy as I drive my ' teuf-teuf.' A skin of milk and roses wiz a constitution zat will last her to a hundred. Ah ! she will not die eezily, you could not kill her wiz an axe. And ah ! my soul, what eyes ! But yes, you could kill her ; you could kill her very quick. How ? Wiz a broken 'art. Look at 'er eyes, 'er 'art would break like zis twig if she loved you and you treated her bad. She is like us. We French can hate ! " he shook his fist at an imaginary enemy. " It is a little why I am here. We can like," he shook me warmly by the hand. " We can loave," he kissed his hand vaguely. " Ah ! my God, how we can loave ! It is a little

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why I am here, too. And *she* can loave also. Only she is not awake yet. All she loaves is 'er 'orse and 'er liberty. But she has a superb constitution, and she will live out forty Mr. Dunn's. Ah! if I was still young, how I should loave zat beautiful girl. But I am old and weary, and 'teuf-teuf' is my only pleasure. Deesgoosting!"

Is Joseph right, and is she not yet awakened? Is her heart untouched, and have those proud and lovely eyes never softened to any man? Oh! if I had the courage to think what often I dream at nights; that they sometimes melt when they meet mine, that a flush rises to her fair young cheek, and her heart beats a little quicker for my presence, I would risk all and tell her how I love her, how dear, dear, dear she is to me.

But I am a coward, and I dare not—yet.

## CHAPTER VI

**M**ISS GREY is ill ; there is no doubt of it.

For a long time I have hoped against hope ; I have tried to believe that my imagination was at fault, that what I fancied to be illness was merely some temporary indisposition, or the result of a too anxious watching of that face that has grown so dear to me. Now I can hope no longer, and the dread certainty has cast a gloom over my life which I try in vain to shake off.

It was the change in her character which gave me my first doubts rather than anything connected with her appearance. She who was so gay and bright has become quiet, calm, listless ; she who was so energetic, full of life and motion, scouring the country on horseback, busy in the garden ; or walking about the lanes with half a dozen dogs barking at her heels, now spends whole mornings in the house reading or gazing dreamily through the open windows, while the sun is shining, the birds pairing, the

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trees bursting into leaf, and everything that bids youth and strength come out of doors and live, calling to her in words which a month ago she would have found irresistible, and calling in vain. It is as if she seems unable to conjure up sufficient energy to give Herne his daily gallop, and yesterday, for the first time since The Elms had a tenant, the grey cob's stable door remained closed and the poor beast whinnied for his exercise in vain.

"I suppose it must be the effect of the first days of real spring," she said, when I called on her in the afternoon, anxious at not having seen her pass the doors all day, "but I don't know what is the matter with me. Perhaps it is that I am merely becoming a lazy person from being a very energetic one. I feel quite well, but simply I have no desire to move."

Though there was a faint touch of wonder in her tone, I noticed with a pang that even her voice was listless and heavy, and her eyes, though they had brightened at my coming, became sad and dull again almost at once.

I had come upon her unannounced and quietly, and she had not noticed my approach. She was seated in a wicker chair near one of the windows, looking out on to the lawn, one hand hanging idle by her side, the other



carelessly twisting a rose which showed up crimson against the white of her muslin dress. Perhaps it was the flower which made it more pronounced, but it was then that the paleness of her cheeks struck me for the first time sharply, and almost involuntarily I had uttered the words which her speech replied to.

"But you yourself look ill," she continued, with a little return to her old gay manner. "Ah, I see what it is. You wanted sympathy for your own misfortunes, and so you brought the conversation round to this dismal subject."

"No, I was anxious," I blurted out, carelessly, "anxious about you. I fancied you looked ill, and——"

"Ill? I?" she laughed gaily. "Why, Mr. Blackwood, how little you know me. I am a creature of the most superb health; one of those constitutions that are the envy and admiration of my girl friends who dance their lives away in smoky London, and don't know what a good gallop on a Herne the Hunter means. Poor old Herne! How sulky he will be to-morrow! Guardian, here is Mr. Blackwood saying I am ill. Tell him I don't even know the word."

"I am happy to say I certainly don't

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believe you know the fact, dear," said Mr. Dunn, who had entered the room at that moment. "But Blackwood is a little right, nevertheless. You do look, perhaps, a trifle tired to-day. It is the approach of spring, no doubt. It often has that effect."

"That is exactly what I told him, Guardian. Or, rather, it is on those grounds that I explained my extraordinary laziness of to-day ; for I certainly would not confess to anything so commonplace as being ill."

The conversation turned after that ; we had a little exchange of harmless jesting, her eye brightened, colour came back to her cheek, and I forgot my fears for the moment.

They returned, however, this morning, and on this occasion they had confirmation from a source which added to their strength.

I had been for a walk on the road to Windleton, and, meeting Joseph Legrand, I had stopped to have a chat with him. He was careering along on "teuf-teuf" when I caught sight of him, and seeing me wave my hand he pulled up with a rattle and jar that sent him almost head foremost out of his saddle.

"Aha, so it is you, friend Blackwood, it is ?" he said. "I was wondering who ze handsome young man could be who ap-

proached so pensively. But all ze yousse and beauty of ze neighbourhood is out zis morning. Be quiet, teuf-teuf ; do not make so much noise. Here is Mees Grey who comes riding, riding along (and she eez pensive too), and 'er 'orse does not like you when you breeze so 'ard."

I started and turned just in time to see Miss Grey pass on Herne the Hunter.

She smiled and bowed, but her head drooped again after she had gone by, and I saw that she looked pale and tired. I wished for a moment that I had not engaged Joseph in conversation, for she was riding slowly and I would have liked to follow her. I knew the way she was going, however, for her favourite ride through the wood, and I determined to meet her as she came back.

"Tell me, Joseph," I said, after a second, "don't you think Miss Grey is looking ill?"

He looked up quickly from the machinery which he had been trying to silence to allow Herne to pass in peace, and gave me a long and quizzical stare.

"Oho! and so it eez like that," he said. "But, my poor boy, you must be very bad if you see sings which do not exist. Mees Grey ill? Did I not tell you she has a constitution like you will not meet once in a

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hundred years. She is ze type, ze goddess of 'ealth. Mees Grey ill? Look 'ere, I eat teuf-teuf, bones and all, and I drink 'ees petroleum when you show me zat. 'Ullo, 'ere she come back. Look at 'er again. This time wiz ze cold eye of reason, and tell me again zat she could be ill."

I looked. Miss Grey was coming back. She had evidently given up her ride, and turned Herne's head in the direction of home. The horse was fidgetting badly, unwilling to be robbed of the gallop he loved as much as she, and to my amazement I saw that she was hardly riding with her accustomed nerve. She quieted the cob with an effort, however, and as she passed us again she had him well under control.

I glanced at Joseph, and saw that he was standing shading his eyes with his hand, and looking intently after her.

"Well?" I said.

He frowned and fiddled with one of teuf-teuf's levers. Then his face brightened. "It eez the spring," he said; "she wants a tonic. Girls are like zat. This time of year affects everyone. Do I look pale?"

"Not at all," I answered, smiling as I glanced at his round swarthy face.

"Ah, eet does not affect me. It affects

you. You are white. I shall write you a tonic. Sir Benjamin Doubledy will give Miss Grey one too. It will be the same as mine, but it will cost more. Zen ze summer will come, and you will bose look red again. No ; she is not ill. I tell you she could not be ill if she tried. I have a new patient, a very eenteresting case—nerves ! I will tell you about it some day. I go. Good-bye."

He touched a lever, waved his hand, and, with a noise as of a small bombardment, went careering off down the road.

I turned and followed Miss Grey, who was walking her horse slowly on the grass by the side of the foot-path.

I gained upon her quickly, and she looked round as she heard my voice.

"I must really get you to speak seriously to Herne, Mr. Blackwood," she said, smiling. "He is getting too naughty, and he wants a good talking to from a man. Did you see him just now. That was all because I felt tired and turned back, and he wanted his usual canter."

"Did you feel tired," I said, looking at her anxiously, "so soon ?"

"Well, it is rather soon, isn't it," she said thoughtfully. "Hardly a mile from home. I shall begin to think you were right, Mr.

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Blackwood, in what you said yesterday, if this goes on ; and that for once I am really going to be ill. I don't understand it. It is so unlike me to be tired."

She was trying to speak lightly, but there was something pathetic in the wistful expression of her beautiful dark eyes which almost brought tears to my own nevertheless.

I was about to continue the subject, to beg her to take care of herself, to see a doctor, when suddenly she stopped me with a little gesture. "Hush!" she said quietly, "here is Guardian. Don't say anything more about my being tired or—or anything. It worries him so. He hates to even think of my being ill."

Yet that Mr. Dunn was aware that all was not well with her I saw at once from the quick anxious glance he gave her pale cheeks, and the nervous trembling of his big red fingers.

"Back so soon, dear?" he asked, after he had nodded to me, "What a short ride!"

"Herne was naughty, Guardian; and I did not feel inclined to ride to-day. I shall have a longer one to-morrow, that's all. But, tell me, has Mr. Prothero arrived?"

"Yes, dear, and our business is finished. He will stay to lunch with us, however. He had some writing to do, so I left him to him-

self. Will you, too, join us at lunch, Blackwood? This is a business acquaintance of mine who has come down to have a chat."

"Mr. Prothero, of Lincoln's Inn Fields?" I said. "I know him well, indeed; have known him since I was a baby. He is my lawyer and oldest friend."

"How strange," said Mr. Dunn. "Well, nothing could be better. We shall expect you then?"

"I shall be delighted," I said. "I have been rather ungrateful to Mr. Prothero lately, and I shall be pleased to have an opportunity to make my peace with him."

I walked back with Mr. Prothero to the station after lunch. He refused Mr. Dunn's offer of his horses, declaring that he would rather walk, and that he wanted to have a chat with his young friend, as he called me.

"You have known Mr. Dunn long?" he asked me, as we made our way down the drive of The Elms.

"Not long," I replied; "but I know him well."

"Do you? I don't," he said rather drily, turning his withered old apple cheeks and bright eyes up to me quizzically. "And I have known him longer than you have, too."

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No ; I don't know him yet. I say, that's a nice girl."

"She's forty, if a day," I said, gazing at a fat old countrywoman who was passing us ; "and as I happen to know that those two children are hers as well, altogether you can hardly call her a girl."

"Um—m—m !" said Mr. Prothero. "It's a pity you didn't accept that offer of mine for Colombo. The last man wasn't half sharp enough for those niggers."

Mr. Pothero and I are the greatest friends, but there is nothing I like more than ragging him. It is by no means always that I get the best of it, however, for he hasn't been forty years head partner of one of the oldest firms of lawyers in London for nothing.

"Miss Grey is a charming young lady, I should perhaps have said," he continued, after a moment. "May I ask if your sudden determination not to go to Ceylon coincided with her arrival at The Elms ?"

"You may *ask*, certainly," I said. "But, by the way, my determination was not sudden. It was the result of considerable thought on my part."

"She has a very pretty fortune," he said quietly. "A hundred and forty-six thousand pounds."



"Yes ; I am sorry for that," I said rather injudiciously. "But, of course, her fortune, whatever it may be, is very small compared to Mr. Dunn's wealth."

"Is it ?"

"If you are not aware of it, I will tell you that he is enormously wealthy," I said.

"Is he ?" asked Mr. Prothero. "You seem to know more about him than you do about the young lady. Now, I appear to know more about the young lady than I do about him. Strange, isn't it ?"

"Mr. Prothero, I am not in the witness-box."

"And I shouldn't be examining you if you were, Mr. Blackwood."

"But you have got that beastly legal habit of asking questions when you already know the answers. Get rid of it, Mr. Prothero, or it will be the ruin of you, yet."

He laughed. "Do I know the answers to all the questions I ask, Arthur ? I wish I did. But, ah, dear me, my boy, I sometimes think I know too much ; I sometimes think I know too much."

We drifted on to other subjects and gave up sparring after this ; but as I shook his hand and saw him into the train, "Arthur,

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my boy, you have been speculating," he said. "Don't do it again."

"I won't," I returned. "It doesn't really amuse me ; but as speculations go, my little one was rather successful. I made nearly two thousand pounds by it."

Mr. Prothero wagged his head. "Yes ; Mr. Dunn has a wonderful talent for getting money," he said musingly ; "a wonderful talent."

## CHAPTER VII

**A** FORTUNE of a hundred and forty-six thousand pounds, and the certainty of Mr. Dunn's millions when he dies, and I am engaged to marry her !

If God spares her for me—if God spares her for me.

Ah, knowing her as wealthy as she is, how did I ever summon the courage to ask her to be my wife ; and how gladly, how willingly would I give up every penny and take her, beggared and ruined, to see her as I saw her first !

Mr. Dunn does not know of our engagement though it has existed now for more than a week. More than a week of heaven ; more than a week of happiness that can be given to few in this world. How strange to think that it is possible to be as happy as I have been and am, while over my heart hangs the shadow of that sickening fear ; fear which I cannot shake off, which comes and touches me at night with its chill finger and wakes

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me cold and trembling ; which catches my breath and holds me silent and sad even when I am with her, under the sunshine of her presence—oftener when I am with her !

How strange it seems. Yet are not the peasants near Naples happy ? Weren't they happy in Pompeii in the old days too, those careless Romans ; didn't they live and love and hope while over them hung the shadow of a fear—which fell . . . which fell !

But that was a convulsion of nature, a burning mountain [splitting open. What could puny man do against such forces. While this . . . Oh, heavens, I am a man, with all a man's strength and determination. Surely I can cure her ! Surely with the ardour of my love, with the power of all my will, I can compel her back to health again ; back to that brightness and life which were hers so short a time ago.

But I am wrong. She is not ill. Sir Benjamin says so. He called the other day on his way to the Prince. He hardly glanced at her. He gave her a tonic, as Joseph Legrand said he would do, and smiled at my gloomy face meeting him with anxious query at the gate. " I have known the little lady since she was a baby," he said. " She is as sound as a bell. A little run down, that's

all. A tonic will soon put her right again. We are all apt to feel slack at this time of year. Good-bye ; good-bye."

Almost Joseph's words repeated ; and Sir Benjamin is Royalty's doctor. I could have shaken the neat white hand he gave me, for an hour, so happy had he made me, so relieved did I feel. And yet an hour after he had gone my fears revived again in all their strength.

Mr. Dunn, having been obliged to go to town on business that morning, had been unable to wait and see Sir Benjamin ; and Miss Grey and I had arranged to ride out to Plowden Park after the doctor's visit.

On hearing his favourable opinion I hurried home to put on my riding breeches and get my horse ; and made my way round to the morning room, where Jennings had informed me Miss Grey was awaiting me.

The window of the room, looking out on to the lawn, was open, and as I came round the corner of the house I caught sight of her standing by it motionless. She had her profile turned from me slightly, and she did not see me or hear my footsteps on the soft grass. She was dressed in her riding habit ready for our expedition, and had apparently been in the act of putting on her gloves, when her

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hands had dropped suddenly, and she stood rigid and white, her eyes half closed and her body leaning stiffly backwards.

Startled, fearing she was about to fall, I sprang forward, but before I could reach the window she turned, and with trembling steps reached a couch and sank upon it, burying her face in her hands.

I saw that she was crying, and for a moment I hesitated what to do. I had decided, however, to retreat and come back again more noisily, so as not to take her by surprise, when at the first movement I made she looked up swiftly and caught sight of me.

It was too late to retreat, and I advanced quickly. "Miss Grey—Elsie!" I cried. "You are ill; shall I call your maid? What can I do for you?"

She put up her hand. "Oh, please don't call anyone," she said. "I am better; I am much better now. It was nothing, really nothing, but I was frightened, oh, I was so frightened."

She shuddered, and I saw that in spite of her brave words she had not yet recovered her self-possession.

"May I stay until I am sure you are better," I asked; "or would you rather be alone?"

"Oh, stay, please. I don't want to be alone. But I would rather no one here knew that—that I felt ill. But what a shame it is, Mr. Blackwood ; you will be robbed of your ride. I am so sorry. I was looking forward to it so much."

"Oh, don't think of me," I said quickly. "Besides, I am perfectly content. I am—I am always happy when I am with you."

"Are you always happy when you are with me?" she said softly, her lovely dark eyes meeting mine shyly.

"Am I? Oh, if you knew! If I could only tell you," I cried, forgetting everything, and sinking on my knees by her couch. "Am I happy? Am I ever happy except when I am with you. I love you, Elsie; how can I tell how much I love you! Ah, there are no words, but you can see it in my eyes, dear; you can hear it in my voice. I love you, I love you, but I am afraid of you, dearest."

"Afraid? Afraid of me?"

"Afraid. Feel how my hands are trembling; hear how my voice breaks. Afraid of your beauty that haunts me day and night; afraid of the goodness and purity that shine through those lovely eyes of yours and make me ashamed, as they must make any man; afraid of—afraid of all this wealth which sur-

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rounds you and keeps you from me. Elsie, you are listening to me ; there are tears in your eyes ; you are not angry ? ”

“ Angry ? Oh, no. How could I be angry. Poor Arthur ! ” She leaned a little forward and passed her hand gently across my burning forehead. I seized the little fingers and pressed them to my lips, and in her eyes I saw the light that till then I had only seen in dreams. And I caught her in my arms.

\* \* \* \* \*

“ Arthur, if I were—to die—soon, would you be sorry that you had ever met me ; sorry that you had—cared for me.”

“ Sorry ? No, for I feel as if into to-day I had crowded the happiness of a life. But why do you talk of such things, dearest. You are not ill ? The doctor——”

“ Don’t turn so white, poor boy. There, smile again. No ; I am not ill. Only lately, Arthur, I have felt . . . Oh, it was horrible just now ! Like a great black veil that dropped, dropped over my head. But I have not been ill—like that before. Only sometimes I feel so tired, so weary, that it is an effort even to give Herne his exercise. But it is nothing, dear. Sir Benjamin says I am superbly healthy. We won’t talk of my foolish fancies any more. See, I feel quite



well now. We won't ride this morning ; but it is a shame to be indoors on such a lovely day. We will go and see Herne in his stable and tell him our secret. He will be horribly jealous, so you must make yourself very nice to him, sir. Come, look at me. Am I not quite gay again ? ”

\* \* \* \* \*

We told Herne our secret over a carrot, which he munched contentedly while we explained ; but we told no one else, for there are reasons why for the present we should be silent.

There can be no doubt that our marriage would be a great blow to Mr. Dunn. During those first sweet confidences when lovers tell each other all their lives she has talked to me much of her guardian. She loves him, reveres him—how could she help doing so. For nearly fifteen years that man has been an angel to her. For nearly fifteen years she has never known a wish ungratified, a sorrow that could have been spared to her. For all her life, but four brief years, she has been the object of the most unremitting care and affection, and that on the part of a man who has no blood relationship or tie to her whatever.

Elsie's mother, her only living relative at that time, died when she was four years old,

and, dying, left her and her fortune in Mr. Dunn's charge. He had been a friend of Elsie's father, and the widow probably had only him to turn to ; for a bachelor of thirty-five or so, with his mind engrossed in City pursuits, seems hardly the kind of person to whom to confide a baby girl.

However that may be, no trust was ever more nobly carried out, no charge was ever better cared for. He has been a guardian to her, and more than a guardian ; he has been a father to her, and more than a father. It is not a task lightly to be undertaken to tell such a man that his place in her heart has been taken by one she has only known a month or so.

And there is more than that behind it. Elsie tells me that my explanation of the scene I witnessed in the wood that day is the true one. What has made this man, so noble a guardian, so kind a protector, wish to change these rôles in which he shines so conspicuously for one which it is hardly in nature he could hope to fill, it is impossible to say. Elsie herself believes he fancies he has not long to live—he has seemed thoughtful and anxious lately—and that he fears to leave her, a young unmarried girl, alone with all that wealth. That he does not love her, has

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never loved her in any way but as a father, she is certain ; but, whatever the reason, the blow of our engagement coming so soon after would be a cruel one, and as yet she shrinks from dealing it.

I cannot say that I entirely agree with her ; for, sorry as I am for Mr. Dunn (and how could I refuse pity for one who has been rejected by Elsie !), the blow must fall ; but I am far too much her slave not to bow to her slightest decree ; and we are both young yet. She only nineteen ; I twenty-five.

I bow, yet sometimes to myself—never to her—I murmur. Sometimes when she is silent and the animation is gone from her features her fair cheek looks so much paler than I knew it first ; sometimes the dark shadows under her eyes seem so much deeper, her step so much more slow and languid than it used, that the desire grows in me—mad, imperious—to make her mine, that I may tend her and care for her, and with the power of my love win her back to health again.

## CHAPTER VIII

A STRANGE thing has happened. Mr. Dunn has got to hear of our engagement, and it has almost ended in an open rupture between us.

He requested to speak with me on the subject on Friday ; and when I saw he was *au courant* with the state of affairs, I asked him then and there formally for his consent to our marriage. He refused point blank to give it, or to consider me in any way as a possible suitor for his ward's hand.

" There are many reasons," he said, when I asked an explanation of the attitude he had taken up. " Let me state one. I do not, pardon me, consider that you have sufficient means to marry a girl in Elsie's position. With the income you tell me you possess, and with that alone, you would not be able to keep her in the luxury she has been accustomed to. The man who intends to rely on her fortune to keep her properly will never obtain my consent to marry her."

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He merely repeated what has been in my mind a hundred times since first I saw her, yet I could have struck him for the tone in which he said the words.

We were in the library, and he stood facing me with his back to the fireplace, broad, massive, imposing, his feet planted firmly, his big red face set determinedly, his voice cold and cutting. They tell me he can lead a board of directors whither he will, cajoling where he cannot reason, cowing where he cannot cajole. But I was firm in my belief in Elsie's love and trust in me, and while I restrained my temper I held my ground. I told him, what heaven knows to be the truth, that Elsie's money had never entered into my calculations, except as an obstacle to my declaring myself her suitor. I told him, what I knew to be equally a fact, that for Elsie's simple tastes and for my own, my income would be ample ; and that could some catastrophe rob her of her fortune, nothing would be farther than regret from both our minds ; and I assured him of the confidence I had that I could materially increase my income should I decide to give up the life I led at present and take to some serious occupation. I might as well have been talking to a stone wall.

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"There are reasons," he said; "other reasons. Were you to know them you would agree with me. A marriage between you and Miss Grey is impossible; you yourself would be the first to say so."

"She loves me, and I love her," I said. "My dearest hope is to become her husband. There could be no reason which would make me alter that opinion."

His heavy eyebrows came together in a frown, and for a moment I thought he was going to lose his temper. He restrained himself, however, with an effort.

"You are aware, of course, that I am Miss Grey's guardian and one of her trustees!" he said coldly, "and that for nearly fifteen years I have—I have done my duty by her as if she had been my own child. But you are also aware, of course, that a girl of nineteen in her position can marry whom she will. You appear in a very short time to have obtained a great deal of influence over her. You may persuade her to marry you without my consent; you will never marry her with it. She may disobey me; she may choose to so repay the affection and care of her lifetime. If so, you know her better than I. My last word is said."

"And mine for to-day," I answered. "I

shall see Miss Grey with your permission, and I shall hope to persuade you to reconsider your decision."

I saw Elsie, and, as I knew she would, she has fulfilled my highest expectations of her character.

Ah, heaven ! what have I done to deserve the love of such a creature, to win such a heart for my own !

"He will come round," she said ; "I know he will. He loves me, and when he knows it is a question of my life's happiness he will relent ; but whatever happens, whatever happens, Arthur, I shall be true to you and to our love. Oh, believe it, dearest, I beg of you."

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I had been silent concerning our engagement until Mr. Dunn spoke to me ; Elsie did not tell him of it. Who, therefore, did ? It seems incredible that anyone could be found base enough to play the spy upon us, to listen to our conversations and report them. Yet that is what must have occurred ; there can be no doubt of it. Who has done this thing ?

I run over in my mind the list of the inhabitants of The Elms—I know them all by now—and I come to the conclusion that there

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is only one person it is possible to fix on—that is Mrs. Cathcart.

I have never liked that woman ; I have never trusted her from the very first. When I have met her, as I have occasionally, creeping about The Elms with that stealthy walk of hers, that constant backward glance, I have felt the repulsion that some animals cause me.

There is a beast in one of the smaller houses at the Zoo—I forget its name now—which always, as a child, had the same effect on me. It was not in itself repulsive, neither is she, but it repelled more than creatures far more hideous. It had, I remember, that same secret, gliding step, that same startled way of glancing over its shoulder, that same cowed, beaten look. Why should this woman fear to look one in the face ; why should she cringe when she is spoken to ; who or what is it that she fears will spring upon her from the dark corners of the corridors and startle forth the cry which seems to be always trembling on her lips ?

Yet to be fair to the woman, Elsie cannot see eye to eye with me in my dislike of her ; and Mr. Dunn puts the most implicit trust in her. She came to take up the position of housekeeper with him shortly before his



arrival at The Elms. She brought a personal recommendation of the very highest character from one of his oldest friends, and she performs her duties admirably. She is moreover—there is no question as to this—absolutely devoted both to her master and to Miss Grey. There is nothing she would not do for the latter, I am sure ; no dog could follow her more slavishly ; no dog could beg more silently, more humbly, more in earnest for a look or a word from those sweet lips. But she does not like me, I am sure of that.

I had been with Elsie in the garden one morning, and she had asked me to fetch her a book from the drawing-room to decide a playful argument which we had been conducting. I entered the room by the window giving on to the lawn, and made my way to the piano, where I knew I should find the object I was in search of. I had almost crossed the room before I became aware that a woman was standing before the instrument, gazing intently at one of the objects displayed upon its frame. It was Mrs. Cathcart.

I myself started, for I had had no idea that there was anyone in the room ; but my surprise was nothing to the fear imprinted on

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her white face as my footsteps almost at her shoulder caused her to turn suddenly.

She made some excuse for her evident terror, and stammered so lamely over her speech that for a moment I doubted her object in being there, and looked quickly round for the valuable I half suspected her of secreting. There was nothing missing, however, as a glance quickly told me, and soon my eyes were caught by the portrait of Elsie, which stood there prominently in its pearl and ivory frame.

I could have sworn then, as I could swear now, that it was that she had been looking at ; for as her glance followed the direction of mine, her hard face softened and that dog-like look came into her eyes that never leaves them when my darling is near.

The dear face with its deep, dark eyes, and the frank, gay smile hovering on its lips, was looking out at me from the background of the picture, and for a moment as I gazed I forgot the woman by my side, and all in the world but her ; only for a moment, however, for the next I felt that Mrs. Cathcart had turned sharply and was regarding me. As my eyes met hers for the first and only time there was such a strange fierce look in their depths that I almost started back. Then she turned

hastily and left the room ; and, picking up the volume I had come for, I joined Elsie in the garden.

Yes ; she hates me, that strange woman, I feel it, and it is she, I am sure, who informed Mr. Dunn of our secret.

She is jealous ; fiercely, horribly jealous of me, or of anyone who cares for Elsie, save Mr. Dunn, and him she apparently worships only second to his ward. Elsie herself confessed it to me when I told her of the incident.

"She is very fond of me, dear," she said. "Do you mind ? I think all the servants like me, and I am proud of it. I love to be liked. But why do you distrust poor Mrs. Cathcart, Arthur ? She is the best house-keeper we have ever had, and saves me such a lot of worry. She is a little strange, of course ; but, poor thing, I am sure she has had great trouble in her life."

Strange ! Yes ; she is strange, this woman. I have described how her frightened eyes, her stealthy way of walking, her timid manner, repel me always ; her appearance is stranger still. Yet exactly what there is in it which makes it so strange, unusual, abnormal, I find it difficult to say.

She is a woman probably forty-two or forty-three years old. She has evidently

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been pretty once ; would be so still were it not for her grey hair, the lines on her haggard face, and the pallor, the extreme pallor of her sunken cheeks. I have never seen anything to quite resemble that deadly colouring of hers before. She gives one the effect—it is a strange thing to say, but I know not how else to put it—she gives one the effect of someone who has been dead for years, or, rather, who has not lived ; who might have existed in a miraculous way in some vault to which the light of day could not penetrate, and who had felt life and youth, light and sunshine pass her by for ages. And, indeed, if one could imagine her to have met such a fate, and endow her in addition with a cruel guardian who beat and ill-used her, one would suppose her to have just those frightened eyes, that silent step, that trembling, startled manner on re-entering the world that she now possesses.

What her birth is, or from what rank of life she descends, I have never been able to decide. At moments she speaks like a lady ; at others with the tone and expressions of quite the lower classes. Altogether a strange woman and a character I should like to study, but for that fancy, instinct—call it what I will—which repels me from her, and leads

me to avoid her rather than seek an opportunity to cross her path.

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Mrs. Cathcart interests Joseph Legrand as she interests me, but he feels for her none of that antipathy which affects me when I approach her. Whether this is because of his naturally good heart or because she appeals to him as a pathological study, I know not. It is probably for the latter reason, though, for it seems that she is the nervous case of which he promised to tell me the other day.

I had strolled round to pay him a visit last night after dinner, and we were seated before his study fire. We were smoking vigorously and only chatting at intervals, for Joseph and I are too good friends to make conversation for one another, and when we haven't anything to say we simply don't say it. I was drinking whisky and pulling at a pipe; Joseph was rolling innumerable cigarettes and imbibing beer. He took to beer—"pell-ell" he calls it—on his arrival in England believing it to be the national beverage, and now like many another Frenchman he drinks it at any hour, even eleven o'clock at night.

"I am sirsty to-night" he said, as after a long silence he rose to replenish his jug.

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“‘Teuf—teuf’ broke down this afternoon and I ’ad to push ’im ’ome. It was a long way. I sough’t ’e was going ’ard when I started, but I had to go for my exercise. I always go for my exercise after I have seen Mrs. Cathcart. Zere, I did not mean to tell you ’er name, but it matters nothing ; you do not know ’er, and if you did you are discreet. Sings do not come out which you know ; you are sober beyond your years.”

“ I certainly hope I am not given to gossip,” I said, “ I don’t think I am. But Mrs. Cathcart must be an interesting patient.”

Joseph nodded until his cigarette ash fell on his waistcoat. “ Yes, she is,” he said. “ Zat is an eenteresting case. I am very glad to have it, and I don’t understand it no more than ze man in ze moon. I would not tell anyone but you, though ; and I do not tell ’er, for she says I do ’er good.”

“ May I ask what is the matter with her ? ” I asked.

“ Nerves. It is terrible. She is a martyr, zat woman. She control herself, but she is a martyr all the same. She comes into my consulting room so cold and grave you would sink she had ice and not blood in her veins ; she says “ good day, doctor ; ” she sits herself in my chair and zen she scream and scream

and scream. Zen she goes away again so sad and quiet you would sink . . . you would sink she could not raise her voice above a whisper. She says I am sympathetic and do her good. I don't. I don't doo nussing. I just sit and listen to 'er scream till she gets tired. Zen she talks a little and goes away. No ; I prescribe for 'er, and I say 'do zis, do zat,' but I don't do nussing for 'er. I don't know nussing to do."

"I know her by sight," I said. "I have often seen her at The Elms. I do not like her. She strikes me as being a very strange and peculiar sort of woman. She has evidently had a history, and it would be interesting to hear it. I suppose you don't know it yourself ?"

Joseph rubbed his blue chin ; and stared dubiously at me from behind his glasses. "I know someting, and I guess someting more, but not much," he said, rather evasively. "Yes, yes, poor woman, she must 'ave 'ad a 'ard life, a 'ard, cruel life. What that woman has gone through I could not go through, and what she goes through now I could not endure not for . . . not for twelve hours. Yes, it is bad when you look so calm and cold and quiet, and every now and then you have to scream and scream and scream. So, when

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she goes I feel I must get up and go out into the fresh air and ride and ride until ze wind blow away Mrs. Cathcart from my mind ; till it blow 'er away from my mind."



## CHAPTER IX

**I** WILL not give her up ; oh, I will not give her up. Not for a hundred reasons, dark, mysterious, forbidding, imperative, though they may be ; not for a thousand Mr. Dunns ; not though she herself begs me to with tears in her lovely eyes ; though she tells me, and pleads while she says it, that she can never be more to me than she is now, can never, never be my wife.

What can the cause be that has changed her thus, and within so short a space of time ? She loves me ; I know she loves me : she tells me so ; I can see it in her eyes, in every movement of her form, in each inflexion of her voice. Her words remain in my mind, engraven there, as clear and frank as the day she spoke them. " Whatever happens, whatever happens, Arthur, I shall be true to you and to our love. Oh, believe it, dearest, I beg of you."

She was not lying then ; she cannot lie ; then what dark intrigue, what base conspiracy has robbed me of her ; what has made

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her break her vow ? She will not tell me. She denies that there is any evil influence at work to keep her from me. " It is fate," she says, " only a cruel, harsh, irresistible fortune. If I married you you would be the first to blame me ; if I told you—but I cannot tell you—you would be the first to release me from my word, as I now release you, dearest."

Her tone, the drear, dead hopelessness of her voice, chill me even while I struggle to resist.

I gave Mr. Dunn a week ; and then I approached him again, requesting his consent to our marriage. He repeated what he had said, and I repeated what I had said. He advanced his arguments ; I demolished them. He lost his temper and stormed ; I kept cool and renewed my request. In the end he ordered me out of the house, and declared that he would forbid me even to see Miss Grey again or to hold any further communication with her. I replied that The Elms was his and that he had a right to receive there whom he pleased, but that so far as Miss Grey was concerned she was a free agent, and I should see her, speak to her, and write to her until she herself forbade me.

Seeing me absolutely determined, he calmed down. He strode once or twice up

and down the room, frowning and evidently thinking deeply ; then he turned to me with his heavy face cold, hard and resolved.

" You don't believe me : I will convince you," he said. " There are obstacles to your marriage with Miss Grey. Nothing which you could do or which she could do would make any difference to these obstacles ; they are insurmountable. You doubt my word ; will you believe Miss Grey's ? Give me twenty-four hours ; come back here to-morrow at this time, and I will convince you from her own lips."

I laughed at him, with the memory of her words in my heart. " I will come," I said. " I will give you the time you ask, but you have asked too short a space, for in it you have got to work a miracle."

As I passed under Elsie's window I heard her singing gaily, and looking up I called " good morning " to her. She smiled and kissed her hand to me, her whole heart in the gesture ; and I laughed as I thought of Dunn's heavy, solemn face. She loved me, I adored her, and what could come between us !

The next morning when I was shown in I found Mr. Dunn awaiting me in the study. He looked haggard and ill at ease, and hardly lifted his eyes to mine. When he did at last

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he gave me such a queer look that it seemed to strike a chill to my heart, and for a moment I turned quite sick. For if there was anything written on his face it was pity, and why should *he* pity *me*.

"I have very little to say to you," he said. "I fear it is useless for us to discuss this matter again. You look on me now as your enemy and I cannot convince you that I would be your friend. Yet I would save you pain if I could. Will you be well-advised? Will you believe me when I tell you that Miss Grey can never be your wife?"

"You were right," I returned firmly. "It is useless for us to discuss this matter. You offered yesterday to convince me from Miss Grey's own lips. Can I see Miss Grey?"

He nodded his head, and moved heavily to the door. "I will send her to you," he said.

I heard his ponderous step go down the passage; I heard the door of Elsie's boudoir open; I heard her light footfall approach and the handle of the study turn, and I sprang quickly forward. Then I stopped dead, for before I could reach the door she had entered the room and I had seen her face.

The trouble, the pain, the unutterable sadness written on her pale features and haunting the background of her lovely eyes

chill and terrify me now when I recall them ; they held me then frozen and speechless, gazing at her in dumb confusion.

As she looked at me I saw the dark shadows fade from her eyes, and they grew soft again ; a warm flush rose for a moment to her pale cheeks and her lips trembled, but with a quick gesture she held me to my place.

"Arthur," she said, "it is true. I cannot ask you to forgive me, dear, for there is nothing to forgive. I am guiltless. If I were not, there might be hope. There is none. Don't look at me like that, my poor, poor boy, or you will break my heart. Arthur dearest, I said to you the other day that I would be true to you whatever happened, true to you and to our love. I will be, dear ; but, Arthur, I can never be your wife."

Her voice broke the spell that held us, and I flung myself on my knees at her feet. "Elsie," I cried, "you love me still ; what can separate us ?"

She bent her dark eyes down to me and there were tears on her cheek. "Ah, don't ask," she cried. "For I can never tell you. Don't make it harder for me than it is already. Oh, I know all you would say : I can feel all you are feeling. Have I not gone through this scene in my imagination a hundred times

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since yesterday, and tried, oh, how I have tried to think of some way to spare you? I cannot. There is none. I would — Oh, Arthur, save me! I am ill—I am falling—the darkness, the darkness——”

She had turned deadly white, and reeled as she spoke. In another second she had fallen backwards, rigid and helpless, but I had sprung swiftly to my feet, and though I could not save her, I managed to break her fall.

For a second I attempted vainly to restore her, and then, struck with terror at the livid white of her face and her upturned open eyes, I rushed to the bell and rang it furiously.

No one came, and flinging open the door I called loudly down the passage. My cries were answered in a moment and a woman came hurrying towards us, her looks more terrified than my own. It was Mrs. Cathcart.

She pushed past me and sank on her knees at Elsie's side. In a moment she had lowered my poor darling's head to the floor and unfastened the lace scarf round her neck. “Get some water quick, there from the table,” she said. “Quick, quick. How slow you are.” And snatching the tumbler from my hand she sprinkled some drops over the unconscious girl's face and forced a little between her pale lips. “She is ill; you have frightened her,”



"For a second I attempted vainly to restore her."

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she said, hoarsely. "What have you been saying to her. What brutes men are."

Overwhelmed, I attempted to excuse myself, but almost before the first words had passed my lips she turned on me with fury in her white face. "Haven't you done enough harm!" she hissed. "Go; leave her."

I hesitated as Elsie's eyes at last commenced to move and her fingers to unclench themselves; but with a fierce gesture the strange woman waved me off. "Go," she said. "Go! She must not see you when she wakes. Oh, will you go!"

I saw that Elsie was recovering, and that she was in better hands than mine; and with a last look, I left the room.

How I made my way down the avenue and across the road to my home, I know not, but I found myself at last, seated in my study with my burning forehead resting on my hands, and Mr. Dunn's words ringing in my ears: "I would save you pain if I could. Will you believe me when I tell you that Miss Grey can never be your wife."

\* \* \* \*

That evening a note was brought across to me by Jennings, the butler at The Elms. It was from Elsie; the first I had ever had

from her. "Arthur, dear," it ran, "I am writing to you to say what I would have said this morning, when I was taken ill. Perhaps it will be easier to write than it was to say it when I was looking into your poor sad face, but, oh, it is so difficult still. Your eyes, dear, kind, handsome eyes, looked at me so lovingly as I said those cruel words, yet with such wonder in their depths. They seemed to ask mutely if it could be Elsie Grey who spoke to you, the Elsie you have learned to know so well by now. And can I wonder that they asked the question when it is one I ask myself a hundred times—since yesterday. Am I the Elsie Grey you used to know, who rode about the lanes with you, and laughed and sang, and was gay and happy : lately, dear, so happy. Ah, I am not, Arthur, and I can never be again. Something has happened which has changed me—for ever. The Elsie you knew is dead and buried, and in her place is left only a terrified, broken-hearted, bewildered girl, who feels as if all the world she knew and loved had crumbled to atoms beneath her feet. Arthur, I cannot tell you what has caused this change, I can never tell you. Oh, forgive me, dear, forgive me the pain I cause you, but what I said to-day is true. I can never be your wife. Don't hate me, dear,

don't think me false or fickle, and don't, ah, don't believe that this is some sudden resolve which time or circumstance can change. The barrier which has risen between us will rise always ; the cause which forces me to this will exist until the end. Arthur, I can tell you now, what I did not dare before ; I do not think that the end is very far away. In marrying me, poor boy, you would after all have made but a sad bargain ; for I feel, dear, I have felt it often lately, that I have not very long to live. I felt it that day, do you remember, when—when we were to have ridden out to Plowden Park ; I felt it this morning when I fainted and woke to find you gone. And so, perhaps, dear, it is better after all that I am forced to be so cruel : forced to tell you that we must part and never meet again—for it is wiser that we should not meet. You will think me cruel ; you will blame me ; perhaps, even, you will hate me, but in time you will forget. Ah, I pray you may, I pray you may. Forgive me, dear, forgive poor broken-hearted Elsie."

\* \* \* \*

I have seen her. I forced my way into the house and insisted on speaking to her face to face. I begged her to tell me the cause of this sudden change, to explain this

mystery ; I implored her on my knees to reconsider her determination ; I vowed that nothing, nothing in the world could influence my love for her, or make me part from her while her heart was mine. She remained inflexible. " I love you," she said. " I shall love no one else, but I cannot be your wife. You yourself would be the first to say so if you knew."

They were almost Mr. Dunn's words, and wild with grief and passion, I told her so, and accused him of instigating them, of planning some vile conspiracy to separate us.

" It is not he," she said. " There is no plot, no conspiracy. It is Fate, a cruel, irresistible Fate which has set me apart, which pursues me and must always pursue me while I live."

I argued ; I implored ; I was rough, even brutal. I could not bend her an inch. She repeated only—" I love you, but I cannot marry you. You, yourself would be the first to blame me if I did. If I told you—but I cannot tell you—you would be the first to release me from my word."

I saw at last that she was weak and ill ; I saw that it was hopeless to attempt to move her from her determination, and I left her. I have not seen her since.

## CHAPTER X

**I** AM half mad with grief and anxiety. A sense of mystery seems to surround all with whom I am in contact ; a terrible yet nameless fear haunts me in the daytime and twines its cold fingers round my heart at night. I wander about my house restlessly, while every accustomed pleasure seems suddenly to have become a torment, and life a burden whose weight I seem scarcely able to support.

What blind fools men are ! A short time ago I was congratulating myself that I had not accepted Mr. Prothero's offer and gone to Colombo. Now I would give all I possess to have taken the chance he held out to me and — no, I would not : a thousand times no ! She loves me, and she has told me so. Is not that knowledge worth the pain I suffer now. Is it not better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all ? But have I lost her ? Can it be that this barrier she talks of is indeed impassable ? Ah, what is

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this secret which she hides from me ; what can it be ? Why does she not tell me ; why does she not let *me* decide ?

But I never see her now ; I hardly even hear of her. If it were not for old Jennings I should be without news of her entirely, and she might be a hundred miles away, instead of so near that from my windows I can almost see her room.

I was too passionate ; I refused to listen to her arguments or to accept her decision, and she will not even answer my letters now. As for Mr. Dunn, he has definitely refused to allow me to enter his grounds. Elsie remains in the house or keeps to the other side of the gardens, and it is only through Jennings, whom I have bribed heavily, but who I believe really likes me for myself as well, that I hear anything of her at all.

The old fellow creeps across the road at night and taps at my window. He is very shy and diffident, but I give him a drink and a cigar, and after a time I get him to sit down—very gingerly, on the edge of a chair—and we talk of The Elms and its inhabitants.

Without being precisely in my confidence Jennings has a very clear idea of the course events have taken and my object in extending my hospitality to him, and he does his best

to keep the conversation in the groove he knows will please me. But what he tells me serves little to raise the weight from my mind, or to shed any light on the events which have brought matters to this pass.

It seems that the cloud which overhangs my life rests too on the house over the way, and weighs on its inmates as well as on myself. Mr. Dunn appears harassed and anxious, and when he is not in town, which he has been more often of late, spends his time shut up in his study.

"And his temper ain't what it was, Mr. Blackwood, sir, not by a long way," says Jennings. "Always a good master, sir, for the twelve years I've served him, always a kind master, but touchy and irritable lately such as you'd hardly credit."

And Elsie, too, according to the old butler, has changed very much. She never rides nowadays, and spends most of her time between the garden and her room. There is a little shaded rustic seat on the farther side of the house—I know it well—where she sits for hours, her hands on her lap, listening to the stream that runs at the foot of the lawn, and dreaming.

"She ain't at all the young lady she used

to be, Mr. Blackwood, sir ; so bright and singing and always on the go. She looks pale-like and she don't move like she used to. I puts it all down to that Mrs. Cathcart. My young lady's never been the same since she came to us."

Jennings shares my dislike for Mrs. Cathcart, in common, apparently, with all the other members of the servants' hall. "Creeping about the house as if we was all dead and she didn't want us to rise," he says gloomily. "I can't abear that woman. Though perhaps I shouldn't say so, for Miss Elsie seems to like her, and she's more with her now than Lizzie, her own maid. But there's something funny about that woman, sir. Why, she don't seem sometimes more than half alive. Not that she ain't a superior person, and seen better days, and does her work well."

"You think she's seen better days, Jennings?" I asked, more to keep the conversation going than from any curiosity as to Jennings' opinion of the housekeeper.

"Seen better and seen worse, sir," replied the butler. "She's a lady, sir ; but she must have been in some queer places in her time. She had a bit of a flare up with Lizzie one day—it was about Miss Elsie, I think—and Lizzie said the language she used was some-



thing awful, quite street language. But as a rule, I must say she's a respectable person. Tidy! She's that tidy you wouldn't believe. They say her room—she always does it herself and keeps the door locked—is that spick and span you'd think it was a bandbox. But she's so mysterious and troubled-looking that she gets on your mind, she really does, sir, and it ain't good for Miss Elsie to see so much of her. Ah, well, what with one thing and another we're a sad lot over the way, Mr. Blackwood, sir, and the house don't seem the same place at all."

Jennings is right: the house over the way appears to have changed its character of late and to have become charged with a sense of gloom and mystery. Is it because I miss Elsie's radiant figure which greeted my eyes so frequently when I looked down from my window; is it that my imagination has tinged everything with my own sad thoughts? I know not, but it seems to me as if even the tradesmen's boys hush their footsteps as they approach the house's precincts, suddenly conscious of some alteration in the place.

This sense of mystery and strangeness appears to have extended itself even to people only remotely connected with The Elms. I had occasion to go to town yesterday to see

Mr. Prothero on business connected with my estate. The sight of his withered old cheeks and bright eyes recalled to me the conversation we had had concerning Mr. Dunn and his ward on the road to the station after his visit to The Elms. He had joked me then about my knowledge of Mr. Dunn, and had declared that he himself was better acquainted with Elsie's affairs than with those of her guardian. I remembered the half jeering speech he had made at the time, and my heart gave a sudden leap as I recalled it. If anyone in the world could give me some explanation of Elsie's conduct surely he could ; and, considering our relations, surely he would not refuse to do so.

I broached the subject with as much diplomacy as I was capable of at the first opportunity, and he answered me with the greatest apparent frankness. " Miss Grey, as I think I told you," he said, his bright eyes twinkling as he spoke, " has a fortune of a hundred and forty-six thousand pounds. I happen to know the amount, as I am trustee for her—co-trustee with Nicholas Dunn. Dunn is also her guardian, properly appointed. She is a young lady for whom I entertain the highest respect, nineteen years old, pretty, as I dare say you can see for yourself. She is of good

family, but was left without any relations, and no care for her. Mr. Dunn took charge of her, and has carried out his task of guardianship, as you can also see for yourself, in a most excellent fashion. She is of sound constitution, accomplished, and a thoroughly good little girl—a thoroughly good little girl. Is there anything else you would like to ask me ? ”

“ Most of what you have told me I know already,” I said. “ And there is something else I would like to ask you. May I beg you to believe that I ask it in no spirit of idle curiosity. Is there anything which you are aware of to prevent Miss Grey from marrying an honest man ? ”

Mr. Prothero started, and, instead of replying, swung round his chair and faced me. He looked at me keenly for a moment, and then nodded his head slowly.

“ That is a strange question,” he said slowly. “ Why do you ask it ? ”

“ Because I have asked her to be my wife.”

“ And what did she say ? ”

“ She said ‘ yes ’ ; but——”

“ She said ‘ yes ! ; then what the devil more do you want ? ”

“ I want nothing more, if she had kept to that,” I said sadly. “ I was the happiest man in the world—for a week.”

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that she now refuses to marry me."

"Why?" Mr. Prothero had snapped out the word with a suddenness which almost startled me, and for a moment I looked at him keenly, but his wrinkled old face told me nothing.

"She gives no reason," I said at last. "She simply tells me she cannot be my wife."

"And you have asked her the reason?"

"Yes; a hundred times. It is not that she does not care for me sufficiently to marry me; I have her word for that. It appears, however, that there is some obstacle, some secret cause which forces her to this decision, and which she cannot put aside. Mr. Dunn refuses to tell me what this obstacle is: she refuses to tell me. I now ask you. If you have any friendship for me, tell me if you know it, for I believe I am the most unhappy man in the world."

Mr. Prothero turned his chair back so that his face was in the shadow once more, and remained for a moment apparently thinking deeply.

"So Dunn refuses to tell you?" he said at last, musingly.

"Yes; he refuses."

"Of course," muttered Mr. Prothero, half to himself; "of course he does. I suppose he must; dear, dear, I suppose he must. You surprise me very much, Arthur, my boy," he continued out loud, "very much by what you have told me. I had no idea that things had gone so far between you and Miss Grey. I had no idea marriage had been even spoken of."

"You have not answered my question," I said.

Mr. Prothero drummed with his fingers upon the table, and for once looked anywhere but in my face.

"My dear Arthur," he said, "I cannot answer it. It is for Miss Grey to say whether she will marry you or not."

I bit my lips angrily. "You are prevaricating," I said quickly. "You are playing with me. It is not fair or kind. This is a matter of—of more than life and death to me, and I come to you to ask a plain question which requires a plain answer. You do not give it. You are torturing me. Speak, man, speak."

He saw that I was agitated and losing my control, and he raised his hand quickly. "Forgive me," he said solemnly. "I will answer you. Personally—and please remem-

ber that I am speaking both as a lawyer and as a friend who has known you all your life—personally, I see no reason why Miss Grey should not become your wife, supposing you to love her as a man should love the woman he is to marry, and supposing her to return that affection. At the same time I must say this: I can appreciate the feeling which might make a girl like Miss Grey decline to link her future with yours; I can understand her motives and sympathize with them. I can tell you no more; believe me, Arthur, I can tell you no more."

And from that moment to the end of our interview he refused to speak another word on the subject.

\* \* \* \*

This evening Jennings has been here and tells me that Elsie is ill. She had one of her fainting attacks again in the morning, did not recover so quickly as on the last occasion, and has been confined to her room ever since. Can it be possible that both Joseph Legrand and Sir Benjamin are mistaken about her constitution, and that she is suffering from one of those terrible scourges which prey even on youth and beauty such as hers. Her words came back to me: "I fear that I have not long to live, Arthur," and I shudder.

Heaven grant it may not be so ; heaven grant she may be wrong and the doctors right in their assertions. To know that she was really ill and that I could do nothing for her would be harder to bear than any torture I have suffered yet. But she is so young and lovely—Fate could not be so cruel. No ; it is merely some temporary indisposition, or a result of the worry of mind she has gone through lately. Sir Benjamin is one of the best men in London, and Joseph—why, I would trust Joseph's opinion as soon as anybody living. But I must see him and have another talk with him to-morrow.

## CHAPTER XI

**I** WENT to see Joseph Legrand yesterday. He was out when I called, but as his servant informed me he would not be long, I decided to wait, and I was shown into his study.

He lives in a little red-brick cottage off the High Street, Windleton, with "teuf-teuf," and one old servant who cooks, opens the door, and does the house. I have not an idea what he makes, but, given his disinclination to apply for money due, and his generosity when appealed to on the score of charity, it must be very little; yet with his French cleverness as to ways and means and his simple tastes, Joseph is better off than many a richer man, and his little home is quite cheery and comfortable.

It is a fact expressive of the character of the owner of Red Cottage, as Joseph's house is called, that while his consulting-room is a model of neatness and orderly arrangement, his study is the most untidy room it has ever been my fortune to enter. In the one every-



thing is clean, polished, and in its proper place in an atmosphere orderly to the verge of discomfort ; in the other chaos, the hopeless, irremediable chaos of second-hand books, old newspapers, tobacco ash and dust rules undisturbed.

For Joseph the doctor and Joseph the private individual are two different beings. To see him at a sick-bed ; to watch his neat clever hands at work, the delicacy of his touch, the quickness with which his instruments are seized, used and laid down again each in its proper place, and to appreciate the unerring certainty of every movement is to know one man. To meet him, work over for the day, in a ragged smoking cap and embroidered jacket, covered with tobacco ash, rolling innumerable cigarettes amidst the litter of what looks like an old bookstall turned upside down, his quick eyes beaming from behind his glasses and a contented smile on his blue-shaven face, is to make the acquaintance of another. But in either case Joseph excels, for he is as pleasant a companion as he is a skilful doctor.

Thanking the old woman who showed me into the study, I picked my way through the litter of the room to an arm-chair, and, disposing of a bundle of old newspapers which

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covered its cushions, I took my seat to await Joseph's arrival.

He was longer in coming than his servant had led me to expect, and tired of waiting, at last, I took up some of the papers I had ejected from the chair and commenced to glance over them.

What made me do it ; was it chance or Fate ? Does chance, a mere sequence of blind accidents decide our lives, or does an inexorable fate guide us, through our least and most insignificant actions, down a road planned out for us from the beginning ? There were a dozen papers and pamphlets scattered on that chair when I entered Joseph's study ; my hand, idly stretched out to the table to which I had removed them, lighted on one and picked it up. What forced my fingers, unconscious agents, to choose that paper from among the rest ? What was it, chance or Fate, which made me take that first step on the dark and winding road which has opened so suddenly before me.

The papers were a collection of reports of celebrated trials, Joseph's favourite reading. He has an account, I think, of every murder which has taken place during the last fifty years ; but his particular fancy is for poisoning cases.

"It 'eenterests me," he says: "human nature at its worst. We know so much of people's bodies and so little of zeir minds, zat it is always eenteresting to find out more. But zere are so few good poisoning cases. Tell me, friend Blackwood, why it is so easy to poison, and yet there are so few trials for me to read? Is it because so few are poisoned? No; it is because so few are found out. It is so difficult to find out. If I, Joseph Legrand, had an enemy zat I wished to get rid of——"

"There would be another celebrated trial to read," I said.

Joseph shook his head. "No; zere would not," he said. "It is so easy for a doctor. Do you sink doctors are better than other men? No. Yet how many doctors have been tried for poisoning, eh? Why? Because in zeir case one great obstacle is removed; zey can give zeir own certificate of death. Yes; first poison your man; zat is easy for anyone. Zen get your certificate; zat is where the tug comes in. When you've done zat you stop people asking questions. And it is a funny sing zey only ask questions afterwards when it is too late. Read my trials and see how few times anyone sought anything was wrong until after ze person was dead."

I laughingly declined to read his trials on the ground that the bad side of human nature interested me less than the good, and that a murder trial was to me the most depressing form of literature. But on this occasion, while I waited for Joseph, I turned over the leaves of the paper I had picked up, and found that I was getting interested in spite of myself in the dark record of villainy and crime it disclosed.

It was the trial of a servant who had poisoned her mistress, apparently to inherit a small legacy which the latter had left her in her will. I noticed that Joseph's theory was not entirely borne out in this case, one of the dead woman's relatives having apparently conceived suspicions that all was not right some time before the end. For some reason or other she had kept these suspicions to herself, however, and it was only after the woman's death that she had thought of confiding them to a neighbour, who had eventually informed the police.

I was in the middle of her evidence under cross-examination, when Joseph came in, his black eyes shining behind his glasses and his swarthy cheeks glowing. "Aha, friend Blackwood," he cried, shaking my hand vigorously, "welcome, always welcome. I

## THE HOUSE OVER THE WAY III

'ope you 'ave not waited long. I 'ave come a long way, from Bentfield ; twenty miles in three-quarters of an hour. Ze road was 'illy, but 'teuf-teuf' 'e carried me well. I 'urt my 'ead a little ; I forgot to put on ze brake soon enough at Everley 'ill, but it was nussing."

Joseph is absent-minded, as I think I have said, and he does occasionally forget to put the brake on, but he and "teuf-teuf" are watched over by a special providence, and contrive to get themselves out of scrapes in a wonderful manner.

Joseph took off his gloves and coat and looked at me. "Will you sink me very rude if I put some plaster on my 'ead," he said ; 'I 'ave ze sings 'ere. You can go on reading while I do it."

I gave him the required permission, and continued my account of the cross-examination. I could not immediately find the place where I had left off, but my eye, glancing up and down the page stopped at last, caught by a few lines which I had already once perused :

"Witness could not say what it was which had first made her imagine that Mrs. Skelton's illness might be being produced by unnatural means ; she supposed it was because it had seemed so peculiar to her that the deceased

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should be ill. She had been friendly with her for forty years and had never known her sick or ailing. Deceased had always been an exceptionally vigorous and active woman of strong constitution, and it had been her pallor and apparent disinclination for exercise of any kind which had first attracted witness's attention."

At first I did not realise what had drawn my eyes to these lines and caused me to read them over for the second time. Then, as the truth suddenly commenced to dawn upon me, I knew, and I felt myself turn pale, while a shudder crept down my back. "Deceased had always been an exceptionally vigorous and active woman of strong constitution, and it had been her pallor and apparent disinclination for exercise of any kind which had first attracted witness's attention."

As I held the report before me with trembling fingers, reading and re-reading till the words burned themselves into my brain, my thoughts flew back to the events of the past weeks ; and, a nameless fear making me turn sick and faint, I flung the paper from me and sprang to my feet. "Joseph ! Joseph ! for God's sake help me," I cried, "or I shall go mad. They are poisoning her ; they are poisoning her !"

Joseph dropped his plaster and turned to me, pale and startled. Then he leaped quickly and lightly to my side. "Sit down and let me undo your collar," he said, "or—yes; that's right, undo it yourself, while I get ze window open. We'll 'ave some air. Now you're all right. Zat's better; zat's better. But who's being poisoned? Oh, I see, you're reading one of my trials."

"It is not that, Joseph," I said quickly, attempting to recover myself. "Or, rather, it is that trial and something which it suggested; something so frightful, so terrible — Joseph, you are a doctor; I have great faith in your skill and knowledge. Tell me, for God's sake, tell me, is it possible that Miss Grey is being poisoned?"

Joseph stared at me as if he was convinced I had taken leave of my senses.

"Miss Grey being poisoned? Miss Grey?" he said, amazedly. "Why, what in ze world should make you sink zat?"

"It was those lines that first brought the thought to my mind," I said. "Read them. But, heaven help me, now that it has been suggested to me, I am not sure that the idea, shadowy and uncertain, has not haunted me before."

Joseph, still staring in amazement, took

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the paper slowly and read the words I pointed out to him ; gazed at me again, and then re-read them.

" I don't understand," he said, " what has zis to do wiz Miss Grey ? She is strong and vigorous, yes, but she is not ill."

" But she is ill, Joseph," I said. " She has been ill for a long while ; I am certain of it. At all events, there can be no question of the fact now, for when I last heard of her she had been compelled to take to her bed."

" Tell me about it ; tell me what you know," said Joseph, after a moment.

Forcing myself to be calm, I did my best to give him what particulars I could of the change the past few weeks have witnessed in Elsie's health and appearance.

Joseph listened attentively, but when I had finished he shook his head. " I see nussing in all zat to suggest necessarily anysing so terrible as zat Miss Grey is being poisoned. All ze symptoms you 'ave described might come quite naturally of themselves," he said. " On ze ozzer hand, of course, zey might certainly be symptoms of chronic irritant poisoning. But, tell me zis, why should zey be ? You yourself tell me zat Sir Benjamin Doubleday has seen Miss Grey. 'E knows 'is work. Zough I called 'im a 'umbug to



you ze other day, 'e is no bigger 'umbug zan ze rest of us. And why should anyone poison zat lovely young lady ? ”

“ I know not,” I replied ; “ but there are devils in this world, and the horrible thought maddens me. Ah, Joseph, why should she be ill like this ; why should she, who was so gay and bright, now look so pale and sad ? Why should she, who was so busy and active, now spend her days dreaming in her chair, too languid to care to move. What is the meaning of those fainting fits, that terrible depression, that black veil which drops over her and frightens her ! ”

“ I cannot tell,” said Joseph quietly. “ It may be much, it may be leetle, as I said. I am not her doctor ; Mr. Dunn 'e don't like me. But if she is ill, she will 'ave a doctor to attend to 'er, and 'e will tell you. I could not without seeing 'er.”

“ Of course, you are right, Joseph,” I said quickly. “ I will go back at once. I must see Jennings and find out who is attending Miss Grey.”

I was dazed and hardly knew what I was doing, I think, under the influence of the terrible idea which had taken hold of me, and Joseph saw it and stopped me.

“ Be careful what you are doing,” he said

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quickly. "Remember zat to suggest zat Miss Grey is being poisoned is to accuse somebody of doing it, and zat without a shadow of proof, almost, I must confess, without a reason. Remember zat nussing is more difficult zan to say a person is being poisoned, even for a doctor. Symptoms by zemselves are not to be relied upon ; zere are diseases whose symptoms so closely resemble ze action of some of ze mineral irritants zat zey would take in ze devil 'imself. And remember zis : why should anyone poison Miss Grey, and who would do it ? No, no, friend Blackwood, I do not sink anyone. I sink you 'ave read my trials which are so eenteresting for me, but which are too strong for you, and you 'ave poisoning on ze brain. I sympasize wiz you, but wait, friend Blackwood, before you say what you sink in such a case as this."

"Wait !" I cried. "And meanwhile if it were true—!"

"I do not sink it is true," said Joseph. "And—tell me, do not be offended, you are very eenterested in Miss Grey ; have you any rights over ze young lady ?"

I felt myself turn red as he asked the question. "Rights ?" after the events of the past few days. "None whatever," I said slowly.

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"Then what can you do?" asked Joseph. "Are you prepared to go and accuse Mr. Dunn of murdering her for her money, he who is millionaire? Will you accuse the servants? Who then? There was a case—let me see if I 'ave it 'ere——" And he commenced turning over the papers on the table. I noticed that one of the trials was illustrated, and coming behind him I glanced over his shoulder. My eye was instantly caught by a portrait on one of the pages, and I looked at it closely. "One minute, Joseph," I said, arresting his hand as it was about to turn the leaf. "Who is that?"

He stopped and examined it with me. The portrait was that of a young and beautiful woman of twenty. She was exquisitely dressed in a costume of ten or fifteen years before, and was seated at a table, her chin resting lightly on her hand, her whole attitude graceful and becoming in the extreme. She had been taken so that her glance looked straight at the spectator, and her eyes were dark and lovely, yet in their depths there was such a strange look, half of sadness, half of terror, that one's first involuntary admiration faded as one gazed, and gave place to a feeling almost resembling awe. Yet that

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look, strange as it was, seemed somehow familiar to me, too, and met my eyes with a queer shock of recognition. I passed my hand across my brow in doubt and wonder. Where had I seen it before? Where had I gazed into those dark, mysterious eyes?

"Mrs. Belton," I read out. "Easton & Sons, photographers, Norwood." "Whom does that remind you of, Joseph? Why can't I think? The face is as familiar to me as my own."

To my amazement, Joseph turned to me slowly, his sallow features suddenly as pale as death, his black eyes staring. "My God!" he said; "my God!"

"What's the matter?" I cried amazed. "Who is it? What do you mean?"

"My God!" he repeated, and then with a staggering movement he crossed the room, and reaching a cupboard near the door, took out a bottle of brandy and a glass. With trembling fingers he poured out half a tumbler of the liquor and tossed it off, and stood motionless, staring helplessly still at me.

His silence, his emotion, the fear he was in acted on my nerves, already overstrung, and seizing him by the shoulder, I shook him violently. "What in heaven's name is the

matter, man ? " I cried roughly. " Are you mad ? What is it ? "

My brusque action seemed to recall him to himself, and with an effort he shook off the dumbness which had seized him. He took up the paper again, and holding it before me, though his fingers trembled still, he made an attempt to speak calmly. " What is eet ? " he said huskily. " Can't you see ? You asked me whom zat reminded you of ; who it was. Can't you see who it ees, man ? Can't you see ? "

Touched myself with his fear, though as yet hardly knowing the cause of it, I seized the paper from his hand. " Good God ! " I cried in my turn. " Yes. Mrs. Cathcart. "

With wide-open eyes fixed steadily on mine, he nodded slowly. " Yes, Mrs. Cathcart, " he said.

## CHAPTER XII

**F**OR a few moments Joseph and I stood staring at one another speechlessly, and then he broke the silence with an exclamation and a blow of his hand on his forehead. "Mrs. Cathcart!" he said again; "Mrs. Cathcart! And I never sought of it before, zough I have read zat trial a hundred times."

At the word "trial" I started, and a shudder ran through my veins. "Trial!" I repeated. "What is the trial, then? Who is this woman?"

Joseph's eyes wandered doubtfully from mine to the paper which he held, and back again. He hesitated for a second. "What trial? Who is zis woman?" he said slowly. "Zis woman here"—he tapped the paper with his finger—"zis woman either committed one of ze most cold-blooded murders of ze last fifty years, or—or she was one of ze greatest martyrs who ever lived. But she committed it, of course; zere is no doubt of it. But is it possible you do not know

who she is ; zat you 'ave never 'eard of ze Belton case ? ”

“ The Belton case ! Mrs. Belton ! Good heavens, yes, of course ; the woman who poisoned her husband. I remember perfectly. She was a fiend. But Mrs. Cathcart ! Oh, it is impossible, Joseph ! It is absurd ! ”

Joseph shook his head, regarding me with an anxious look which seemed to have something of pity and fear in it. “ No, it is not impossible,” he said ; “ I must tell you something zat I would not 'ave told you otherways, zough it is betraying no confidence for I 'ave only made it out in my own way. Zat woman, Mrs. Cathcart, 'as been in prison. I am sure of it.”

“ But it is impossible,” I said again. “ Would Mr. Dunn have taken her had that been so. Why, I remember Elsie—Miss Grey—telling me she came to them with excellent references.”

“ I don't know 'ow zat may be,” said Joseph quietly, “ or 'ow she managed it, but she 'as been in prison. I cannot tell you 'ow I know, but I know it.”

His solemn manner impressed me more than I cared to show, but I still fought off the thoughts he had raised. “ Even so,” I

said at last. "What has she to do with Mrs. Belton? Why, Mrs. Belton was sentenced for life. It says so here."

Joseph's eyes still looked anxiously into mine from behind his glasses, and his glance never wavered. "A life sentence means twenty years in England, sometimes fifteen, wiz good conduct," he said.

But still I insisted. "And you pretend that after fifteen years, fifteen such years as those must have been, you can recognize a woman from a portrait in a paper?" I cried.

Joseph took up the paper and held it out to me. "It is from a photograph, and looks a good one," he said quietly. "But look 'ere, is Mrs. Cathcart ze kind of woman you see every day? Was Mrs. Belton? Look again at zis picture, and tell me zat you doubt. And remember it was not I who recognized her first; it was you yourself."

I felt the room going round with me. "But, good God, do you know what you are saying," I cried; "do you know what it means if it's true? Do you want to make me think that this woman, this cold-blooded murderess and convict, is living in the same house as Miss Grey, seeing her almost hourly—God, perhaps even nursing her—and I, I am standing here doing nothing. But I must



go ; Elsie must know ; she must be warned. No, not Elsie ; she is ill ; she need not perhaps be told. I must see Dunn."

And without waiting even to say good-bye to Joseph, I caught up my hat and stick and set out. But before I had gone twenty yards Joseph had caught me.

"You are excited and over-worried," he said quickly. "Take care what you do. It would be wise to say nussing to Miss Grey, as she is ill. Be careful also what you tell Mr. Dunn. To call any one a murderess and a convic' is dangerous when you 'ave no proof ; and zere is always a possibility—oh, yes, perhaps I 'ave been too quick—zere is always a possibility zat zis is not ze woman after all."

I saw that he was only speaking to comfort me. "Yes, yes, I will be careful, Joseph," I assured him. "But I must let Mr. Dunn know. I must do something, or I shall go mad."

He nodded, and grasping my hand for a second, turned back to his house.

With my thoughts in a whirl I made my way rapidly along the road from Windleton. I had no definite plan in my mind when I left Joseph's home, nor as I neared The Elms had I decided any more clearly as to the

course I was to take, but I had a firm conviction that it was imperative I should act at once upon the discovery I had made. I must inform Mr. Dunn who was the woman he had taken into his house, and free Elsie from the contamination—if my worst suspicions were right—from the danger of her presence.

I was destined to meet with a check, however, at the very outset. A strange servant opened the door to me at The Elms, and informed me that Mr. Dunn was not at home.

I knew that Elsie's guardian had forbidden my entry into his house, and guessing the girl had had her orders given her, I slipped half a sovereign into her hand. "My business is very important," I said quickly; "very important indeed. I am sure Mr. Dunn will see me if you tell him so from me, Mr. Blackwood."

The girl hesitated with the half-sovereign in her fingers. "Mr. Dunn is not at home, sir, really," she said; "I think he has gone to town."

Was she speaking the truth? I could not tell, and I stood irresolute.

"Is Jennings anywhere about?" I asked at length. "Tell him I wish to speak to him a moment."

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"Mr. Jennings has gone over to Beckenford to see his niece, sir," said the girl, evidently sorry to disappoint me, and doubtful if she had given me value for my half-sovereign, or if she ought to return it. "He had a letter this morning, saying she was ill."

I saw that she was speaking the truth in this case at all events, but as regards Mr. Dunn, I could not feel so sure.

"And Mr. Dunn is not in the house?" I asked again.

"No, sir, he really isn't, sir. And I am sure he has gone to town, sir," replied the girl, her earnestness almost bringing tears to her eyes.

"Thank you," I said, and I turned away; but I hardly taken two steps when I returned. "And Miss Grey?" I asked. "How is she to-day?"

The girl's face brightened at last. "Oh, she is a little better to-day, sir, I think. I heard Mr. Jennings say so before he left."

I saw she was glad to give some return for my tip by answering me favourably in one particular at least, and I almost commenced to believe that I had been wrong to doubt her. Still, it was impossible to say, for I know Mr. Dunn is a man who is accustomed to be well served; and I determined to keep

a close watch on the house for the rest of the day. If he was in The Elms, I might catch sight of him before the evening ; if he had gone to town, he would return by the last train or perhaps sooner, and I could meet him and force him to listen to what I had to say.

Having made this determination I crossed over to my house, and taking up a position at my study window, I set myself to watch.

The hours passed, however, and no sign came from The Elms. If Mr. Dunn was within, he intended to remain there ; if he had indeed gone to town, he must be coming by the last train, for the others had arrived long ago.

As the darkness drew on my suspense commenced to grow unbearable. It is always sad to watch a bright day fade into twilight and die, and on this occasion my thoughts were already anxious and disturbed. As I looked over at The Elms and thought of all the happy hours I had spent there, and remembered that it was forbidden ground to me now, perhaps for ever, a sense of desolation I cannot express stole into my heart. As I watched the shadows and the evening mists steal over the ivy-clad walls and turrets, and imagined Elsie lying there alone in the

darkness, sad and ill, separated from me for ever, perhaps, a wild longing came over me to break down the barriers of conventionality and civilization, to walk boldly across to the door which shut her from me, and, forcing my way in, take her in my arms and tell her that I loved her, that nothing should part us.

And still the night closed down on us, till I awoke at last from a dream of sunshine and Elsie to find that it was pitch dark and nearly midnight. The last train was in nearly an hour ago, and Mr. Dunn had not arrived.

There could be no question about it; the girl who had opened the door to me at The Elms must have been lying, and Mr. Dunn must have been there all along, for never yet in all the time I had known him had he failed to return at night, and would he do so now that Elsie was ill.

What was to be done? Suspense to me in my present state was unbearable. I felt that I could not wait till the morrow, that at any cost I must see Mr. Dunn that night, and I quickly made my resolve. His study was at the opposite side of the house, so I could not look to see if there was a light burning; but I knew that he was accustomed to sit there working or reading until long after midnight on ordinary occasions, and I deter-

mined to make my way across, and, tapping at his window, take him by surprise. In that way I could force an interview upon him ; and possibly it would be a better time for it to take place than the daytime, when there would always be danger of interruption from servants or other visitors.

Deciding rapidly, I put on my cap, and made my way out into the open air.

The night was dark, and none of the windows on this side of The Elms were lighted. I knew my road, however, too well to have any difficulty in finding the gate and the path leading round the lawn to the other side of the building. When I reached it, nevertheless, I discovered that I was destined to meet with another disappointment. The window of Mr. Dunn's study was in darkness, and there was no sign of light here either. It was evident that Mr. Dunn, if he were indeed at home, had retired to bed some time ago, in common with all the other inhabitants of the place.

Hesitating for a second, I was about to turn and go back disconsolate, when I saw the reflection of a light pass slowly across some shrubs which faced the end of the building. Unreasonably startled, I yet marked the window from which I fancied rays had

come, and made my way towards the spot.

As I drew near, the reflection appeared again, but further on, still crossing the shrubs, slowly, almost stealthily it seemed, and I saw that it came from the windows of a corridor which ran for some distance along that side of the house, separating Elsie's apartments from the rest of the building.

Who was it who used that corridor at this hour of the night? Could it be Mr. Dunn, after all, or was it some one going to Elsie, who had been taken worse? I determined to discover; and, keeping on the grass to deaden the sound of my footsteps, I hastened along to see.

As I reached the third and last window, I drew near to the glass and peered in. Yet, at the first glance, I started and drew back, for opposite to me, not three yards away, and looking directly at me (as it seemed to my startled senses) stood Mrs. Cathcart.

She carried in her hand a lamp, which she had shaded with her fingers so that the light fell on her pale face. Her lips were working nervously, and her eyes, those great dark eyes with that strange suggestion of terror in their depths which had looked out at me only that day from the photograph of Mrs. Belton, gazed straight before her.

It seemed to me at first as if she must have seen my figure through the glass, and I stiffened myself into immobility ; but after a second I saw by her attitude and expression that she was merely listening to some sound which had caught her ears, and that there was no intelligence of my presence in the startled gaze which looked into mine.

The way in which she shaded the lamp she carried brought into prominence her eyes and the clear-cut contour of her face, while it left her white hair and the lines on her cheeks less visible ; and the extreme resemblance to the picture in the Belton trial struck me again, almost startling me into a cry. But while I stood there breathless and dazed, she turned swiftly and glided away. As I followed her with my eyes, I saw that the direction she had taken was towards Elsie's apartments, and the next moment her light disappeared through the curtains which closed the entrance to my darling's boudoir.

At any other time I might have taken little notice of this incident, but now, under the light of that terrible resemblance, I could only ask myself with my heart in my mouth what could the adventure mean ? what could the woman want at that hour of night in Elsie's room ? and what was I to do ? For



there was something strange about it all ; something mysterious in the woman's stealthy progress and shading of the lamp ; in her sudden halt and anxious, listening attitude ; and I felt that I could not drag myself away.

Almost involuntarily I approached the window—a French one reaching to the ground—and peered in. I could see nothing, of course, for Mrs. Cathcart had vanished, and the room was in darkness ; but as I touched the glass, to my surprise it yielded and came open, and I stumbled forward almost into the corridor. Either the fastening had not caught properly, or the new servant, in Jennings' absence, had forgotten to close it.

I listened for a moment, but not a sound came from the direction in which Mrs. Cathcart had gone, or indeed from any part of the house, which seemed silent as the grave. If that woman had gone into Elsie's room, as I supposed, how was it that I heard no sound of voices. Yet in that stillness I must have heard had she or Elsie spoken.

The darkness and the silence commenced to weigh upon my mind ; the feeling of dread which gripped my heart since I had read those lines in Joseph's rooms began to grow stronger and more imperative. What was that woman about ? I could stand it

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no longer, I must find out ; and stepping softly into the house, I crept along the corridor.

I reached the curtain which shut off Elsie's apartments from the rest of the house, still without hearing a sound, and raising the heavy tapestry cautiously, I peered through. The boudoir into which I looked was dark, but directly facing me was another doorway, and this gave into a room in which a light was burning. I almost dropped the curtain, ready to retreat, as I saw that it was Elsie's bedroom, but even as my hand moved I stopped, for right before me, with her back turned, was Mrs. Cathcart.

She was bending silently over a table which stood, judging from a brass rail which I could just catch sight of, at the foot of the bed, and my heart beat violently as I saw that the receptacle was covered with bottles and the usual equipments of a sick room table.

Yes, there, not ten yards perhaps from me, lay my darling, ill and unconscious of my presence, at the power, if any dark cause should tempt her to use it, of this woman whom I suspected to be already guilty of the cruellest crime. For I could not doubt that Elsie slept ; the silent movements of her

companion and her cautious glances in the direction of the bed told me that.

Even while I stood irresolute, paralysed with a nameless fear, Mrs. Cathcart turned, blew out the light which stood near her among the bottles, and came towards me bearing her lamp again.

She had moved so suddenly, her action had been so unexpected, that she took me entirely by surprise ; and when she reached the curtain I had no time to do more than drop it hastily and stand staring. But if I was dazed and startled, what of her when she raised the tapestry in her turn and flashed her lamp full into my face. From her glaring eyes to her dropped and trembling lip I never saw such terror expressed so vividly before. Yet her control in its way was marvellous, too, for though her bosom rose and fell as if it would burst the lace across her dress, though the lamp wavered in her fingers like a dead leaf rattling on a branch, she kept back the scream that sprang to her lips and staggered through the curtain, closing it behind her.

For a moment we stood facing one another while she tried to speak, but no sound but a hoarse rattle came from her dried-up lips. Striking her throat violently as if enraged at

her helplessness, she beckoned me to the window as far as possible from the curtain, and faced me again. "Who are you, and what do you want?" she said at last, and her voice sounded dull and muffled, as if it came a long way off.

"You know me. I am Mr. Blackwood," I said shortly.

She passed her trembling hand across her brow, and even then I saw that it was the hand of a woman who had done much hard work. "Mr. Blackwood—yes—Mr. Blackwood," she said. "What have you come here for, Mr. Blackwood?"

"I came—— But that is not the question. What were you doing just now in Miss Grey's room?"

Again the terror in her pallid face, the violent trembling which shook her whole body, startled me and held me breathless, making me feel as if I had struck her across the mouth. "Doing in Miss Grey's room," she gasped; "what do you mean? You were—you were watching. Ah! what right have you—to—to question me? What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean," I said. "But if you will have it, I will put it in another way. What were you doing with those

medicine bottles, Mrs.—*Mrs. Belton* ? Ah ! ”

The exclamation which had broken from me was veritably one of fear as much as of surprise, for as soon as the words had left my lips she had sprung at my throat with a hoarse cry, and we went staggering and reeling out of the window.

I had no idea a woman’s hands could have such strength, for though something was due to the surprise of her sudden attack, it was not for some time, and until I had exerted my full force, that I succeeded at last in getting her fingers from my throat and her hands into mine.

“ You coward, you devil,” she cried, struggling still ; and then in a moment her strength collapsed, and she stood trembling violently, but helpless as an infant.

“ What are you going to do ? ” she murmured at last, trying to control her voice.

“ Do ? I’m going to get you out of this house. Where is Mr. Dunn ? ”

“ He has gone to town. He was to have come back to-night, but he did not. Give me another day.”

“ Are you lying ? ” I said. “ But no, you are not, for the servant told me so too. He will be back in the morning, of course. You must leave here to-night, though.”

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"Give me another day. For God's sake, if you have any mercy, give me a day to—think what I am to do."

"Not an hour, not a moment," I said harshly.

She turned on me again, her eyes flashing even through the darkness which surrounded us, for her lamp had dropped and been extinguished when she sprang at me. "You shall," she cried; "you must. I ask no more than a day; only that, and then I will go—I swear it to you. But give me time to think what I am to do."

"After what I have seen to-night? After what I know? Never!"

"You cruel devil," she cried, "you won't! It is not much to ask, is it?—just one day. And you won't give it. Well, listen to me. You know who is lying there in that room, asleep and ill. If you keep to your determination to turn me out of this house to-night, I will stand here and shriek until I wake her up. You can't see my face, but listen to my voice. You know I will do it. I will cry that the house is on fire, that there are thieves in the place, that you have broken in and are murdering me. Do you want her to die of fright?"

Absurd though her threat sounds by day-

light, her voice then was determined enough, and I knew she would do as she said. And I knew also that the consequences to Elsie in her weak state might be serious in the extreme. I hesitated.

She felt rather than saw my irresolution, and in a moment her voice changed. She caught my hand in the darkness and flung herself on her knees at my feet. "Ah, give me one day!" she begged. "Don't turn me out to-night!"

"I can't leave you with Miss Grey," I said.

"Don't leave me with her. I don't ask you to. I will go to my room and stay there. Listen; I have thought of something. There is a new servant in the house. She does not know you. Let her think you are the doctor. Call her down—I will call her—and tell her she must stay with Miss Grey; tell her I am ill. She will wonder; she will be surprised; but that will not matter to-morrow—she will do what we want to-night."

I thought for a few moments. "Why do you want to stay so much?" I asked.

"Why do I want to? Ah, are you a man to talk like that, and treat me so hardly? Would you like to be turned out of your home at night, out of a home where you

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had been happy—for the first time for so many, many years ? ”

The anguish in her voice, her eager pleading, had their effect on me, but also I felt that she had it in her power to frighten Elsie terribly, and that the means she had suggested to do away with the difficulty of leaving my darling at her mercy, promised security. I made up my mind quickly. After all, if she chose to brazen matters out, I had no proof against her, and I realized that with Mr. Dunn absent and Elsie ill, my position in the house at all was a strange one.

“ Go and find the servant,” I said ; “ she has already seen me once to-day, but she may believe, nevertheless, that I am a doctor. In any case, she must be persuaded to do what I require.”

“ Thank you,” she said ; “ I am grateful to you for this at least.” And with her noiseless step she left me, while I took up a position by the curtain to await her return.

It was some minutes before she came back, but she returned at last, bringing with her the servant who had opened the door to me in the afternoon.

The girl had evidently risen and dressed in haste, and her eyes, in which sleep strug-



gled with surprise, blinked heavily ; but looking at her keenly I saw that she had an honest, stubborn, country face, and I felt that I could trust her.

I quickly took out of my pocket all the money I had about me—it was three or four pounds—and put it into her hands.

“I want you to do something for me,” I said quietly, “and it is very important that it should be done exactly as I say.”

The girl stared at me with the money lying in her open hand, and then turned to Mrs. Cathcart, who looked down at the floor in silence.

“Listen to me,” I said firmly ; “Mrs. Cathcart is not well. It is necessary that someone should remain with Miss Grey, to-night. Will you ? ”

The girl nodded as if relieved, and her square face brightened. “Oh, yes, sir,” she said.

“Very well,” I continued, “go to Miss Grey’s room, now at once. Lock the door, and remain there until Mr. Dunn returns. And remember that on no account must you leave the room, or allow any one else to enter it until your master himself is here. Have you understood, and can I trust you ? ”

The girl’s hand closed on the money at

last, and she nodded, giving a shard glance in the housekeeper's direction. "Yes, sir, you can trust me," she said.

"Very well then, go," I replied, and passing Mrs. Cathcart with a toss of her head, she went to Elsie's room.

The housekeeper and I, left alone, stood in silence for a minute, she motionless, with her eyes still turned to the ground, and her lips, like her face, pale as marble ; I, waiting till I should hear the door of Elsie's bedroom close, and know that she was under guard.

The latch clicked at last in the distance, and I turned to Mrs. Cathcart. "You had better go to your room now," I said ; "to-morrow I shall communicate with Mr. Dunn."

For a moment she turned her eyes up to mine ; for a moment I thought she was about to break out again ; but, biting her lips as if she would make her teeth meet in them, she controlled herself, and without a word she left me.

I watched her until her footstep died away high up the stairs, and then I turned to the window. With the aid of my pocket-knife, I jammed the fastening so that it could not be secured before morning, and

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closing it gently, I stepped out on to the lawn.

It was past two o'clock, and the night was dark, but it was not cold, and until the daylight began to break in the eastern sky I felt no discomfort from my self-imposed sentry duty outside Elsie's window. Then the air began to grow keen and sharp, and towards five o'clock, having heard or seen no more of Mrs. Cathcart, and all being quiet, I made my way homewards to get a few hours' rest.

## CHAPTER XIII

**I** SAW Mr. Dunn the next morning. Tired out with my night's watch, I did not wake till nearly ten o'clock, and as I sprang out of bed, ashamed of my sloth, he drove up to The Elms from the station. He must, I judged, have missed his train the night before, and come down by the early express, anxious to hear how Elsie was.

With the events of the previous day in my mind, I hurried on my clothes, and, caring little for breakfast, made my way across the road.

It was with a considerable amount of nervousness that I approached the house where I had once been received with so much hospitality, and from which, as it seemed to me, I had been banished for so long. How would Mr. Dunn receive me, I wondered, and what would my visit end in. I could not doubt that at least he would be grateful for the startling information I

brought him ; would his gratitude extend so far as to make a reconciliation possible ? Alas ! when I remembered the manner in which we had parted on the last occasion, I could hardly hope for anything so good as that, but certainly the occasion ought to take me at least a step on the right road.

He refused to see me. When I knocked at the door, the servant—another maid on this occasion—told me that her master was not at home.

I returned instantly to my house, and scribbled a note telling him that the matter on which I wished to see him was an affair of life and death, perhaps, and that for his sake as much as my own, I begged him to believe that it admitted of no delay. This communication I sent across by my own man with instructions to wait for an answer.

The reply came almost at once. Mr. Dunn declined to believe that the matter upon which I wished to see him could possibly have any importance for him, but in the hope of finally putting an end to my importunity he consented to see me for the last time. He requested me to make the interview as brief as possible.

I folded the note up and put it into my pocket, and again crossed the road.

On this occasion Mr. Dunn awaited me in the drawing-room. He was seated at a table, looking over some papers, when I was shown in. He did not take the trouble to rise as my name was announced ; indeed, he hardly looked up from the documents with which he was engaged.

I took no notice, however, of the rudeness of his reception, but came straight to the point of my visit.

" You must forgive me for forcing myself upon you in this way," I said, " but I consider that the necessity of the case excuses me, and I am sure you will agree with me when you have heard what I have to say. You have a woman in your house, your housekeeper, of the name of Cathcart."

" I have," he returned briefly.

" Are you sure that is her name ?" I asked.

He looked up surprised. " Am I sure that Cathcart is her name ?" he said slowly. " Why, of course I am. But what on earth has my housekeeper's name to do with you ? Even if her name were not Cathcart, even if it were Jones or Brown, it could not concern you, and I fail to see how it could be a matter of life or death to me."

" Perhaps not of life or death to *you*," I

said quietly. "But possibly to some one near and dear to you, nevertheless. Suppose that your housekeeper's name were not Jones or Brown; suppose that it were *Belton*."

Mr. Dunn gave a violent start, and for a second his big red face turned white as death. "What in heaven's name do you mean?" he said, almost fiercely, staring at me fixedly from under his heavy eyebrows.

"I mean that I state what I believe to be a fact," I said. "You have heard that name in the history of one of the most notorious trials of the last fifty years. I have the strongest reasons for believing Mrs. Cathcart, your housekeeper, to be Mrs. Belton, the heroine of that trial."

"Good God!" The words burst from him, and, though he had his face turned from me, and was shading his eyes with his hands, the emotion which had given birth to them could not be mistaken. I saw the impression that I had made and waited anxiously.

\* \* \* \*

For some moments which seemed much longer to me, he remained silent, his face hidden, his fingers tapping his forehead nervously. When he turned to me at last,

his features had recovered something of their usual ruddy hue, though it struck me then for the first time how changed and ill he was looking lately.

"How did you make this discovery?" he asked at last. "And how can you be sure that it is true?"

I hesitated. I feared that I could not bring Joseph's name into the affair; Mrs. Cathcart was, after all, a patient of his, and while there rested the faintest possibility of a mistake, it was better for his sake to be silent as to the part he had taken in the discovery.

"I saw a portrait of Mrs. Belton yesterday," I said at last. "And I have reason to believe that Mrs. Cathcart has been in prison."

"Is there anything else you know?" said Mr. Dunn, after a moment or two's silence, keeping his face still turned from me.

Again I hesitated. It was evident to me, and it came as a surprise, that neither Mrs. Cathcart nor the maid whom I had paid to watch Elsie had said anything of the matter to Mr. Dunn. Should I mention it to him? I felt doubtful. To a man who took up the unfriendly position which he held, I realized



that it would certainly be awkward to explain satisfactorily the events of the previous night, and would my proofs be stronger were I to do so? As my mind ran over the scene in the corridor, I felt that I must certainly tell him of it, but while I still chose my words, he helped me out of my dilemma.

"What you tell me has amazed me," he said, rising from his chair and pacing up and down the room. "Amazed me more than I can say, and, of course, I can do nothing else but thank you for coming to tell me. I must, however, warn you at once that I believe you to be utterly mistaken in both your statements regarding Mrs. Cathcart. I must tell you that she came to me with the highest recommendations from an old and very influential friend of mine, a person of the very highest standing, and for whose word I have the greatest respect. The woman has served me admirably during the time she has been with me, and I have never noticed anything about her which might give colour to such a startling charge as you bring. However, the matter is much too serious to be dismissed so lightly. I shall at once write to my friend about the woman, and I shall

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make other inquiries which I have it in my power to make. If you are right, the woman shall not stay in my house another moment ; and if the law can do anything to her, as I should imagine it certainly can, it shall."

"I cannot say I hope, but I believe you will find that I am justified," I said. "I must——"

"Oh, you are wrong," he cried ; "you must be wrong ! The thought that such a woman should be in the house with Elsie is too ghastly, too horrible ! But you must excuse me now, if you will. I shall at once commence my inquiries, and get to the bottom of this matter. You can rely upon me to let you know the result the moment I hear. Good-bye."

And leading the way to the door, he saw me out of the house.

I heard nothing from him for twenty-four hours, during which I existed in a state of almost unbearable suspense, and then there came a note from him. It ran thus—

"DEAR MR. BLACKWOOD,—

"I have made the fullest inquiries in the matter concerning which you came to see me on Wednesday, and I am happy to inform you that they are in every way

satisfactory. My friend, of whom I told you, a lady of title and high position, assures me that she has known Mrs. Cathcart for forty years—since she was a child, in fact—and that she is a woman of the highest character. This lady also tells me that Mrs. Cathcart is undoubtedly what she calls herself, and that she was personally acquainted with the husband, who was, like Mrs. Cathcart herself, of superior station in life. Other inquiries which I have made, though without recognizing their necessity, repeat these statements in their essentials. I am glad to be the means of relieving your mind on this subject, and, you may easily suppose, feel myself most pleased at its satisfactory conclusion.

“ Believe me,

“ Faithfully yours,

“ NICHOLAS DUNN.”

I read the letter through twice, and, folding it up, put it in my pocket with a lighter heart.

## CHAPTER XIV

**W**HEN I first commenced to put on to paper this almost daily record of my life and doings, I did so carelessly and in idleness, urged more by that impulse which for countless ages has driven lovers to scribble about the object of their passion, than from any desire that a record should exist. Now, in the light of the strange events which are occurring round me, and in which I am almost involuntarily a participant, I feel thankful that the task has been so fully carried out. If the gloomy and terrible doubts which have come to me of late have any just cause for existence, what an inestimable value these notes may prove to possess : to what a fearful use may they not one day be put. They shall not lose their value from any carelessness on my part in the future. My pen shall be exact to note each mesh in this net which seems closing round my darling, as I hope, as I pray, that my hand may be quick to break through that net to save her.

\* \* \* \*

I had left Joseph Legrand, after my inter-

view with him at his house, himself anxious and disturbed by the suspicions which had struck us both, and on my receipt of Mr. Dunn's reassuring letter I felt it my duty to go at once to see the kindly Frenchman, and put him in possession of the statement.

Joseph has an hour when he receives patients at his house, and this I chose for my visit, finding him seated in his consulting-room when I arrived. He was apparently engaged in lecturing an incredibly old and decrepit villager in a smock-frock, who sat rather crumpled up in a chair facing the doctor and the light, and blinking owlishly.

Joseph waved his hand to me as I entered, and greeted me as he always does, like one returned from a long and dangerous journey. "Aha, friend Blackwood," he cried, "welcome to ze abode of science, to ze magician's cave, to ze—ah, it is a good sing you come when you did. Anuzzer minute, and zis old fool would 'ave been dead. I should 'ave killed 'im wiz my own 'ands. Wat do I say? Killed 'im: why, 'e is 'alf dead already. Look at 'im. 'E is ninety-eight. 'E says 'e is a 'undred and two, but 'e isn't; 'e is ninety-eight, and 'e comes to me to doctor 'im, to patch 'im up, to keep 'is tired

old 'eart beating a little longer. Wat for? Good 'eavens, wat for! 'E can't taste, 'e can't 'ear, 'e can't smell, 'e can't eat properly, and 'e 'asn't got the sense to die. 'Ave you, eh? Deesgoosting!"

The old man shrunk still deeper into his chair, and mouthed nervously at his fiercely glaring questioner.

"I'm a little 'ard of 'earring, sir," he piped timidly at last.

"I tell you, friend Blackwood," continued Joseph, after giving his patient a withering glance, "zat ze curse of zis age is ze fear of death. We are all afraid to die nowadays, young and old; death haunts us like a nightmare. Look at zis old fool; 'e 'as worn out every pleasure and enjoyment 'e ever 'ad, and zey were few enough; 'e 'as seen all 'is friends go one by one; 'e is a trouble to 'imself and every one round 'im; zere isn't a wheel or screw of 'is old works zat isn't long ago past its service, and 'e comes to me to keep ze old sings going. 'E daren't die. But 'e should have died if you 'adn't come in. Do you 'ear, you old 'umbug. And now you will go away and live for anuzzer seven, eight, ten years yet. 'Ere, take zis; it is a shilling; and now quick, off you go!"

The old man grabbed the coin and tottered quickly out, half relieved, I fancy, to get safely to the door, and Joseph turned to me again.

"It 'ees true," he said. "'E will go on like zat for years. Zere is nussing to kill 'im. And ze life, ze vital force in 'im would keep a great man so many years longer for 'is country, would save a muzzer to nurse 'er child. One of zese days I shall zink of a way to transfer ze vital force from one person 'oo does not want it to one 'oo does, friend Blackwood, and zen I shall retire. Like zis: on one side we 'ave a strong 'ealthy young man. 'E 'as got into debt or been disappointed in loave or somesing, and wants to keel 'imself. On ze ozzer side we 'ave a great scientist 'oo needs a few more years to perfect a great discovery, or a great statesman 'oo requires time to complete 'is policy, or a doctor, like me, 'oo keeps a whole village in good health for 'alf nussing a year. I go to ze young man, and I say: 'You want to die because she don't loave you? Very good; come with me into my little room, and you shall die so comfortably you shall not know 'eet is 'appening to you at all.' And I say to ze great statesman: 'For ze peace of Europe

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it 'ees necessary you should live, is 'eet not ? Well, come into my little room, and I will draw you off five, ten, fifteen years of the best quality of life. And I lay ze young man down on one operating table, and ze statesman on anuzzer, and wiz my little machine I transfer ze vital force of ze young man to ze celebrated statesman, and wake up myself next morning millionaire ; good, 'ees is not ? I 'ave not invented ze little machine yet, but I shall sink of it. Ah, 'eet is sad, friend Blackwood, zat zose who are wanted to live die, and zose who are of no use live. I cannot understand 'eet ; 'eet is deesgoosting."

I laughed, but my laugh turned to a sigh as I thought, with a pang, of Elsie.

"Joseph," I said, broaching quietly the object of my visit, "Mrs. Belton is not Mrs. Cathcart ; she cannot be."

Joseph was marching up and down the room, as usual, and he had his back turned to me when I spoke. For a moment he remained silent.

"'Ees not she ?" he said at last, without turning round. "Ah, zat is good. 'Ow do you know it ?"

"Mr. Dunn has told me," I replied, "or, rather, he has written it. See, here is his



letter giving me the result of inquiries he made at my instigation."

Joseph took the letter and read it, rather carelessly, as it seemed to me. "Zat 'ees all?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied; "but—but surely that is clear enough! What can you object to that?"

"I object nussing to it," said Joseph quietly. "Eet ees quite clear, sure enough, only your good Mr. Dunn is being imposed upon, zat ees all."

I stared blankly at him. "Good heavens, Joseph," I cried, "you don't mean that you don't believe what he says? You don't mean that Mrs. Cathcart is Mrs. Belton after all?"

"I believe 'e sinks wat 'e says is true," returned Joseph; "and wezzer Mrs. Cathcart 'ees Mrs. Belton or not I do not know, zough it seems likely; but zis I do know, wat I told you before, zat woman is not a highly respectable person of good character, for, as I told you, she has been in prison."

"You still say that, after this letter, after the inquiries Mr. Dunn has made! Oh, it is impossible, Joseph!" I cried.

Joseph came up to me, and, holding the lapels of my coat, one in each hand, a favourite trick of his, he fixed me with his keen black

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eyes—eyes which never looked as if they needed glasses.

“Leesten, friend Blackwood,” he said. “Don’t talk to me. Am I a kind of what you call it silly fool?”

“Certainly not, Joseph. That is the last thing——”

“Don’t talk to me. Leesten. I ’ave studied zat case ; I ’ave studied zat woman. I could do nussing for ’er, because zere was nussing to do, but I ’ave studied ’er : I ’ave watched ’er : I know ’er as I know my pocket ; and I tell you zis, I, Joseph Legrand, zat she ’as been in prison. Not a little time, a long time. Not a little prisoner, but a big one, a convic’ ! When I was in ze ’ospitals, when I was ’ouse surgeon, I ’ad a friend, doctor of a convic’ prison. I saw many of zese women and much of zem. Once you know zem you cannot mistake zem. Zere are many signs, some leetle, leetle, some big, big, and zey are all sure, leetle and big. Bah, do not talk to me, zat woman ’as been convic’, convic’, convic’.”

“Good God !” I said, the terror of our former conversation returning to me with renewed force. “But if she is indeed a convict, in spite of Dunn’s inquiries, she may equally well be Mrs. Belton.”

"Zat ees so."

- "And if she is Mrs. Belton she has already been convicted of one cold-blooded murder, and—Joseph, you must help me, you must advise me. This is a matter of life and death. Listen, Joseph ; I love Miss Grey ; she is more than the world, more than my life to me. If she is in danger she must be saved. What can be done ? If your suspicions are correct, as seems only too fearfully probable, I cannot convince her guardian. He refuses to see me. It was with the greatest difficulty I obtained the interview which resulted in this letter. That he will listen to me again I cannot believe. What am I to do ? "

Joseph wheeled an armchair forward. "Sit down," he said, and darting to a cupboard, produced a couple of bottles of beer and opened them. "Drink," he said, pouring out a glass for each of us. "Drink, and we will sink what can be done."

I had little inclination to accept the proffered liquid, but I knew that he considered the imbibing of "pell-ell" to be the correct thing under the circumstances, and I swallowed half the contents of the glass obediently.

"Zat ees better," he said, following my

example with gusto. "Now, let us sink. You loave Mees Grey, you tell me. I do not wonder. You could not 'elp it. I loave 'er myself. She ees not well, you say, and you fancy zat 'er illness ees not natural—zat she is being poisoned, in short. Mrs. Cathcart may or may not be Mrs. Belton (zat should be easy to find out) but she ees (or I am a silly fool) a released convic', and therefore a woman of very bad character. And you fear, wiz some reason, zat she may be ze cause of Mees Grey's illness. Ees not zat so?"

"Ah, how is it possible to avoid the thought!"

"Perhaps eet ees not possible. But tell me zis—no one poisons for nussing—what has zis woman to gain by poisoning zat loavely girl?"

"Ah, that I cannot tell. None that seems credible."

"Very well. Anuzzer sing. Mr. Dunn loaves Mees Grey?"

"Yes, devotedly; I am sure of it; it is impossible to doubt it. He has been for fifteen years the most affectionate and devoted guardian it is possible to imagine. Miss Grey has told me so a hundred times."

"Very well. Now you 'ave told Mr.

Dunn who you sought Mrs. Cathcart was. 'E is a clever man of great experience, and 'e ees devoted to Mees Grey, like all ze world. 'E knows, also like all ze world, ze 'istory of ze Belton case. Do you sink, eef zere was ze slightest chance zat Mees Grey was being poisoned zat 'e would keep zis woman in 'is house. 'E knows more about Mees Grey and more about 'ees 'ousekeeper zan you do ; your suggestion would 'ave made 'im suspect, if 'e did not suspect before, if zere had been any cause for suspicion. 'Ees it not so ? ”

“ I suppose so. Yes, you must be right, still——”

“ Wait a moment. Zat 'ees one side, and I sink eet ees a strong one. On ze uzzar 'and, I know Mrs. Cathcart 'as been a criminal, and I suspect 'er of being Mrs. Belton. Mees Grey ees ill, and the symptoms you 'ave told me of might either be perfectly natural or zey *might* be symptoms of chronic poisoning. Zere 'ees ze uzzar side.”

“ And surely that is strong enough to——”

“ Eet ees not strong enough to accuse Mrs. Cathcart openly of attempting to poison Mees Grey. Zat is a dangerous step to take and might mean prison for you, too, if you failed to prove your case.”

"Then what is to be done? I must do something, Joseph, and quickly, too."

"Zere are several sings to be done," said Joseph, taking another pull at the beer and looking up refreshed. "First of all, do you sink I could see Mees Grey?"

I started up from my chair and then sank back despondently. "If you only could," I said, "it would be an untold relief to me, for somehow I fear I have little faith in that smooth old gentleman, Sir Benjamin. But how to contrive it? The fact that the suggestion came from me would be sufficient to have it negatived by Mr. Dunn, I am sure; but I might possibly contrive it through Miss Grey herself. Yes, I feel sure if I asked her she would consent."

"I do not pretend to know more zan Sir Benjamin," said Joseph, "but I could at all events tell you wat I sink when I 'ad seen 'er. Zat ees one sing. Ze next ees zis. If Mrs. Cathcart ees Mrs. Belton she has been released from prison lately. If she 'as been released on what you call ticket of leave, she must report 'erself to ze police. Zey will know where she is, and you can find out wezzet I am right, I sink. Zat is anuzzer."

"You are right, Joseph," I said eagerly. "Of course I can, and if I can prove that

Mrs. Cathcart and Mrs. Belton are one and the same person, even Mr. Dunn must be convinced. But all this will take time, and meanwhile? I dread to think of Miss Grey being even one hour longer at the mercy of that woman."

"In ze meantime—but wait, let us see what friend Mann says." He darted into the next room, returning in a moment with a large brown volume in his hand.

"Zere ees good advice in zis big fat book," he said, patting it tenderly, "for us doctors, especially zose to whom your noble English laws are not quite familiar. Eet ees chock full of good advice. Yes, let us see what kind Mann, ze kind Mann, ha, ha! says."

He turned over the leaves quickly, reading here and there.

"Aha!" he said at last, waving his hand to me, while his quick black eyes sparkled behind his glasses; "Wat did I tell you! 'Ere we are. Ah, 'e is as full of good sings as an egg is full of meat. 'E does not start very well, but see 'ow 'e goes on, zis kind Mann. 'E says in a case where poisoning is suspected, whatever one's suspeeciouns, it is absolutely necessary to 'ave ample corroboration before accusing anyone of the act, as ze consequences in case of failure of proof

would be most serious. (I sink I told you zat, but see 'ow 'e goes on). Ze best zing 'ees to watch carefully ze patient and everyone 'oo 'as access to 'im, especially anyone 'oo seems to be particularly eager to attend to ze patient and to administer 'is food or medicine. Note if what is left of zese latter is thrown away directly the patient has finished with them, on the excuse zat everything should be perfectly fresh zat 'e takes. Further, a trained and thoroughly trustworthy nurse should be engaged, who should be wiz the patient continually, and through 'oose 'ands everysing administered to ze patient should pass. Zat ees good. Care should be used to remark if after any particular food is taken the unfavourable symptoms become more marked, and, if so, to secrete some of it for future examination. Zat ees good, too. Anuzzer suggestion, says friend Mann, which ees recommended by some authorities but not by uzzers, on account of ze resemblance it 'as to compounding a felony (whatever zat means), is to approach the suspected person and give them to understand zat you 'ave proofs against zem, and zat on ze recurrence of further unfavourable symptoms you will put zese proofs into ze 'ands of ze police. Now zat ees good, too ; zat ees best



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of all. But ze first sing ees for me to take a leetle, leetle glimpse at zat loavely girl."

"If it is in any way possible to arrange it, it shall be done," I said. "Shall you be at home all day, Joseph?"

"Yes, except for my hour's exercise on 'teuf-teuf' at two. After zat I will stay at 'ome."

"Very well," I said. "To-day is one of the days on which Mr. Dunn usually goes to town. It is possible I may be able to see Miss Grey and obtain her consent to see you. I will start off at once to make the attempt. If you will keep yourself free to accompany me if necessary I shall be endlessly obliged, Joseph."

"I will keep myself as long as you like, friend Blackwood. Come when you please, I shall be 'ere."

I thanked him again, and taking my leave made my way out on to the Windleton Road.

## CHAPTER XV

**W**OULD Elsie consent to see Joseph, I wondered, as I made my way homewards along the dusty road over which the tall elms cast a deep shadow.

The leaves which threw this grateful shade had been green buds hardly yet opening when I had first met my darling on that road. How long ago that day seemed now, and what changes the intervening time had brought ! Though I did not know her then ; though I had never even heard her name, I seemed far more separated from her, when I had held her in my arms and heard her whisper that she loved me, than I had when the only barrier between us had been a social one so easy to surmount. For it was her own will that stood between us to-day, her will and the mysterious reason which both she and her guardian declared made marriage impossible ; and that will, though I had tried with all the power of my love I had not been able to bend——

"Good morning, sir." It was old Jennings, the butler at The Elms, who had come up unnoticed while I pondered.

"Hullo, Jennings, you are the very man I wanted to see," I said, stopping him as he was passing me, after touching his hat respectfully.

"Am I, sir," said the old man, taking off his hat and mopping his forehead gloomily. "Well, I'm glad someone wants me. It'll be a change from the way things 'ave been going lately."

"Why, Jennings, what's the matter? Plenty of people want you. I'm sure Mr. Dunn does. He has told me a dozen times he couldn't do without you."

"Has he, sir; and couldn't he? Well he's going to. He's perhaps changed his mind since the days when you used to come to The Elms, sir. Changed like everything else has changed of late."

"Why, Jennings, you don't mean to say you are leaving Mr. Dunn?"

"I do, sir. I've got to go, like the rest of us old servants. The cook's gone and Mary she goes to-morrow. Things are altered at The Elms; have been for a long time now. It ain't the same place at all."

"But *you*, Jennings. Why, what has

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happened? You leaving The Elms? It seems incredible."

"Ay, it seems strange, don't it, sir; but we couldn't get on any longer, me and the master, and so it's better to part. He's been a good master to me for fifteen years, but he ain't the same gentleman lately; and the house ain't the same either. Poor Miss Elsie's still poorly and it seems to have got on his mind. He sits cooped up in his room when he ain't in town, and don't take no interest in his gardens or his fowls or nothing. His passions of temper are sometimes quite terrible, sir, and so I'm going at the end of the month. Miss Elsie heard I was, and she got round the master and he asked me to stay on, but lor, sir, it wouldn't be no use. It was bound to come."

"It is very sad; I am very sorry, Jennings," I said. "But how is Miss Grey? You haven't been near me lately to give me any news."

"Well, sir, I've been too busy, if you'll excuse me. I've been looking round for somewhere to go when I leave here. There's a little public I'm thinking of, not far from where my sister lives at Endwick. They're asking fifty pounds more than I want to give, but if they come down I shall take it. But

Miss Elsie, sir? Well, sir, I don't hardly know what to say. She's poorly, there ain't a doubt, though Sir Benjamin do say it ain't anything serious, and care is all she wants. I don't know, and so I can't say. Sometimes she's worse and sometimes she's better. Sometimes she'll get up and go about the house for a day or so quite like her old self, then she'll get bad again and take to her bed, and Mr. Dunn 'll send for Sir Benjamin. But—I may be wrong, sir—but it seems somehow to me that every time she goes back to bed she's worse than she was before, weaker like and poorer."

I turned away for a second to hide the mist that rose to my eyes.

"Has Mr. Dunn gone to town to-day, Jennings?" I asked.

"Not to-day, sir, no. He's going by the early train to-morrow."

"To-morrow? Jennings, you must do something for me. I want to see Miss Grey."

Jennings scratched his wrinkled cheek. "Well, sir, you know Mr. Dunn has forbidden it," he said.

"I know; still I must see her. Listen, Mr. Dunn has forbidden it I know, but perhaps she will consent. I have particular reasons for requiring an interview with her.

If I write asking her to grant one will you see that she gets my letter ; will you give it her with your hands ? ”

“ I’d be glad to oblige you in any way, Mr. Blackwood, you’ve always been a gentleman to me. Yes, I could say I’d do that, sir.”

“ Very well ; she must get the letter to-day. Can you call for it. Where are you going now ? ”

“ Just into Windleton and back, sir.”

“ Very well ; come to my place on your way home. And listen, Jennings ; if Miss Grey will see me to-morrow—I shall ask for to-morrow—you must arrange that Mr. Dunn knows nothing of my visit. You will do this for me for nothing, I know, but I shall not forget it ; you will not need to worry about the extra £50 on the price of the public-house.”

“ Lor, sir, it ain’t much to do if Miss Grey says as how she’ll see you, is it ? ”

“ I think Miss Grey will say so, but we will see. Will you call for the letter ? ”

“ Yes, sir, I’ll call as I come back. I shan’t be long.”

“ Thank you, Jennings,” I said, and I turned homewards. But before I had gone far I turned and caught the old man up.

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"By the way, Jennings," I said, "is Mrs. Cathcart staying on at The Elms?"

"Yes, sir; why shouldn't she be? She's one of the new ones, she is; she don't need to go."

\* \* \* \*

I found my letter to Elsie more difficult to write than I had imagined it would be. At first, while I was talking to Joseph, I had thought of writing to beg her to see him, but I had come to the conclusion that I could hope nothing without meeting her personally, and I confined my letter to a request for an interview.

I explained that I was aware Mr. Dunn intended to go to town on the morrow, and begged her to give me a few minutes alone in which to explain to her a project upon which I had set my heart. I also assured her that she need not fear my reopening the subject which had ended in the shattering of a friendship I had valued so highly.

I had fancied my letter to be diplomatically worded and calculated not to alarm her, and I was apparently correct in my judgment, for during the day I received a little note informing me that my request was granted. No time was mentioned, probably for good reasons, but I was informed that Jennings

would call for me and take me across to the Elms some time during the forenoon.

The little note was cold and stiff in the extreme, yet I cared little for the words or form of it. It was the knowledge that she consented to meet me, that I should see her and speak to her again, that overpowered every other thought in my mind. Cold the letter might be ; there was some cruel and mysterious reason for its tone, doubtless, but how little hardness was in my Elsie's pure and gentle heart I knew well enough, and I had little fear that I should find her altered otherwise than on that one question of our future happiness.

I did not leave the house in the morning, but as soon as I had breakfasted and seen Mr. Dunn's carriage take its road to the station for the London train, I seated myself at my window and waited for Jennings' arrival.

He came about half-past ten, and, without waiting for him to be shown in, I hurried down to the gate to meet him.

"Is it all right?" I asked, trying to speak calmly, though my heart beat fast.

"Yes, sir, Miss Elsie's waiting for you in the little Blue Room. She's up and a little better to-day. Master went off by the nine o'clock to town."



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We walked across the road and up the avenue to the house in silence.

"Miss Elsie chose the Blue Room so that you won't be seen by the other servants coming in," said Jennings as we made our way round to the side of the house. "It's better master don't know you've been."

He stopped as we approached the long French windows of the room where Elsie awaited me. "Miss Elsie asked me to—she told me to prepare you—she said you weren't to be surprised or shocked like if she's looking ill, sir. She's better to-day, she told me to tell you, sir, and the doctor think's she's getting on all right."

I hardly heard his words, but, nodding hastily, passed on to the window. A quick tap, a gentle "come in," a glimpse of a slim white-clad figure, and Elsie was in my arms.

\* \* \* \*

How did it happen? I cannot tell. I only know that as her eyes met mine in an instant the dark cloud which had separated us seemed to roll away, and she was resting on my heart, her slight figure shaken with hysterical sobs and her poor little thin fingers clutching at the lapels of my coat, as if she feared that every moment I should be dragged away from her.

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For a time I let her rest thus, stroking her soft hair and trying to quiet her sobs, and then I attempted to lead her back to the chair from which she had risen. At my first movement, however, fearing that I was about to leave her, she clung to me so tightly that I was obliged to desist, and supporting her tenderly, I waited for the outburst to exhaust itself.

The hysterical sobs ceased at length, and placing my hand under her chin I tried to raise her face to mine. But she only shook her head and buried her flushed cheeks deeper in my coat.

"No, no," she murmured, piteously, "don't look at me, Arthur. I am ugly, you won't love me any more ; I am so thin."

I tried to laugh and speak lightly. "My poor little darling," I said. "Could you ever seem anything but the loveliest to me ! Well, let me see your dear eyes, at least ; they cannot have altered."

"Yes they have," she whispered, with a brave attempt at smiling. "They are red with crying. Oh, Arthur, I have longed for you so. I have been so frightened, so terrified sometimes ; though I—I hardly know what of."

"Come and sit down, darling, and tell me

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all about it," I said, gently, and gradually I contrived to lead her to a chair and relax the almost unconscious grasp of her fingers on my coat. "There," I said. "Now tell me; but don't talk if you fear it will fatigue you. I am so happy only to look at you again."

She hid her face once more as I spoke, glancing timidly at me through her half-closed fingers. But I had seen her now, and my heart almost stopped beating as I realized the change the past few weeks had made in her fresh loveliness. Not that she was less beautiful than when I had first seen and loved her (to my eyes, at least, so weary for a sight of her) but that her loveliness had taken an ethereal air which made her seem hardly of this earth, so pale, delicate and transparent were her cheeks, once fresh and round, so thin and weak were her hands that used so skilfully to restrain Herne's overflowing spirits.

"She is dying; good God, she is dying!" was the thought that flashed to my mind, as I bent over her fingers, kissing them to hide the emotions on my face.

"Poor old Herne," she said, almost as if she had followed my thoughts. "I think I could not manage him now, Arthur, could

I ? My hands are so weak, but how I long sometimes for a gallop again ! ”

“ You must have patience, darling ; you will soon be well, and Herne must be gentle with you until you get strong again.”

Her lovely eyes, looking larger for the dark circles beneath them, met mine almost wildly, and a shudder ran through her slight form. “ Oh, Arthur, am I a coward to be afraid to die ? ” she said, her lip trembling again.

“ But you are not going to die, darling,” I cried, clenching my teeth to repress the cry that started to my lips. “ Heaven would not be so cruel ! But listen, darling. I want you to do something for me. I have promised to say nothing—ah, it is hard, dear—of the subject that haunts my thoughts day and night, waking and sleeping ; I will keep my word ; will you do something in return for me ? ”

She raised her eyes to mine. “ Ah, if it is anything I *can* do, Arthur.”

“ It is ; I want you to see Joseph Legrand.”

“ Joseph Legrand ? The doctor ? ”

“ Yes, dear. I do not—think you are very ill, darling, but—he is very clever. I have great faith in him, and to tell you the truth I think Sir Benjamin is getting past

his work. It would be a great relief to me to have Joseph's opinion, to hear him say you are on the way to recovery."

She smiled sadly at my eager, hopeful tone; her eyes turned from mine.

"Sir Benjamin believes that there is nothing serious the matter with me," she said. "But if you think Dr. Legrand is clever, and it would comfort you to hear what he says, I will see him. But, Arthur, I fear Guardian would not allow it. He thinks so highly of Sir Benjamin."

"Then you must see him without your guardian's consent, Elsie," I said, quickly. "You must do it for my sake, dearest, because I beg you to, and because—because I have kept my promise to-day. Do you want me to break that promise?"

She started, and drew her hand quickly from mine with frightened eyes. "No, Arthur, oh, no! Never, never break that. What you want can never be. I will see the doctor. How can it be arranged?"

"He can come to-day. He is waiting at home at Windleton to hear from me. He can be here in an hour. May I send for him?"

"Do you want it so very much, you poor, poor boy. But suppose—suppose he tells you I am very ill?"

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"He won't, darling. And even should he think so he will cure you. I have the greatest faith in him. Oh, Elsie, think how much it means to me to feel that you are in good hands. May I send?"

She trembled, and then, as if deciding quickly, touched the bell by her side, while I rose and walked to the window.

"Can one of the grooms take a message into Windleton?" she asked, as a servant entered. "Very good. Will you give him your message, Ar—Mr. Blackwood?"

"Tell him to go to Dr. Legrand at Windleton, please," I said, "and say that I am waiting for him here."

"Oh, thank you, dearest," I cried, when the servant had gone. "I feel happier than I have felt for many a long day." And then I crossed quickly to her again, for I saw that she had buried her face in her hands, and was sobbing violently.

"Elsie," I cried, "my love, what is it?" and throwing myself on my knees, I tried to draw her hands away. But the terror in her eyes made me desist, and I could only gaze helplessly at her.

At last she put out her little hand and clasped mine so fiercely that the strength in her fingers surprised me.

"Oh, stay with me, stay with me," she cried wildly. "Don't leave me. I am so frightened, so lonely."

"Of course I will stay, Elsie, my sweet," I said, seeing she was hardly conscious of what she said; "but don't be frightened; there is nothing to fear; Joseph is the most harmless of men."

"Oh, it is not that," she said, calming herself with an effort. "I know Dr. Legrand. I do not mind seeing him. But I am a coward, I suppose. There are times when I cannot help giving way. And then, too, Arthur, I feel that all this is wrong. You should not be here. I should not have allowed you to come. I am deceiving my guardian, and I shall be deceiving him in seeing Dr. Legrand, and he has been so very good to me. Do you know I fear he is not well himself; he has been strange to me lately, and sometimes for a whole day I see nothing of him. And, oh, the loneliness is so hard to bear, Arthur!"

"My poor little girl!"

"There seems sometimes—I can hardly explain it—to be a dark and terrible cloud hanging over me and over all around me. Sometimes I long, oh, how I long for my mother. Is it not strange that, though

I have but the faintest recollection of her, of late I think about her constantly, and dream of her so often. You see, Arthur, a woman wants other women around her, and I have no women friends near here. Guardian does not care for society nowadays, and Mary Winterton, whom I asked to come and stay, could not. If it were not for poor Mrs. Cathcart, whom you dislike, you strange boy, I could not bear it. She has been so good to me, Arthur, so kind, attentive, and thoughtful. She seems to watch me and anticipate my slightest wish. She insists on doing everything for me, even to bringing up my food when I am not well enough to get up, and seeing that I take my medicine regularly."

God! I felt myself turn white, and I dug my nails into the palm of my hands to force myself to listen calmly, while the words that Joseph had read out to me came back to my memory: "Be careful to note if any one seems anxious to administer the patient's food and medicine."

"It is Mrs. Cathcart who gives you your medicine, darling?" I asked, trying to speak carelessly. "I am glad she is so kind to you."

"No one could be kinder, dear. You will



try and like her now you know this, for my sake, won't you, Arthur? She is so fond of me."

And so food and medicine both passed through this woman's hands—through the hands of this convicted poisoner! What I should have said or done, I know not, but at that moment a knock came at the door, and Joseph Legrand was announced.

He followed the servant into the room, brisk, genial, breezy as ever, with his inimitable French tact putting Elsie at her ease at once; but his eyes were keen and quick, and I saw that they took in eagerly every line of the pale, lovely face raised to his.

There was no expression on his swarthy features, however, which could tell me what his first glimpse of his patient said to him, and I had to gather what consolation I could from that fact. Surely, had the impression been bad, he must have given some sign, he who had been so confident of Elsie's health and constitution.

He turned to me after a moment's easy chat. "Will you be my very good friend, and see zat no-one 'arms 'teuf-teuf,'" he said, pinching my arm good-naturedly. "I 'ave left 'im in ze road at ze gate, and I should not like ze leetle boys to put pins in 'is tyres

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and bust 'im, nor would 'e. Will you be my very good friend ? ”

I nodded, and with a glance at Elsie, who smiled back at me, I left them together.

Hardly outside the door, I stopped suddenly, arrested by the sight of Mrs. Cathcart pacing up and down the passage, her hands pressed to her forehead, her eyes staring wildly in front of her.

So fixed was her gaze, so deep her thoughts, that she did not see me until I was almost upon her. As she almost brushed my sleeve and started back, I saw the old look of fear come into her dark eyes, and felt rather than heard the cry that sprang to her lips but never passed them.

“ You,” she said at last, as I looked down to her gloomily. “ Was it you who brought that doctor to her ? ”

“ What business is that of yours ? ” I said harshly. “ Yes, it was I.”

Strange in her every action, this strange woman drew near to me now, drew near till her dull black dress rustled against my coat, and looked into my eyes.

“ Ah,” she said at last, softly, and then without another word she turned and commenced again her walk up and down the passage.

I let her pass me twice, wondering what caged animal she reminded me of, with her wild, hunted eyes, and short, breathless paces; and then, as she came by for the third time, I spoke. "So you are still here?" I asked.

She met my gaze fixedly. "Yes, I am still here, Mr. Blackwood," she said. "Yes, thank God, I am still here."

"So far, Mrs. Cathcart, *so far*," I could not resist the remark.

She swung round on me fiercely, as if about to break out into a fit of passion such as had startled me that night outside Elsie's room. But with an effort she restrained herself. "Don't make an enemy of me, Mr. Blackwood," she said quietly; and then, with a repressed violence, almost terrible to listen to: "For God's sake, don't make an enemy of me. I am trying to like you."

Amazed, I stood watching her for a moment or two longer, but she never raised her eyes to me again, continuing her restless pacing up and down, as if unconscious of my presence; and, at last, I turned and left her, making my way down to the gate.

It was a quarter of an hour before Joseph joined me, but I saw him coming down the avenue at last, and I almost ran to meet him.

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"Well?" I cried, "what do you think of her? Tell me, man, quick! Don't keep me waiting!"

Looking round him hurriedly, he drew me outside the gate and across the road in the direction of my house.

"What do I sink?" he whispered, "*I sink zat she is being poisoned!*"

## CHAPTER XVI

**T**HOUGH I realized that he only confirmed my own suspicions, Joseph's words fell like drops of frozen water on my heart, and I stood for a moment, sick and faint, with the blackness of despair closing round me.

Then I turned quickly back again in the direction of The Elms. "That woman!" I cried, "it is that woman!" And in a stride I was at the gate.

But quick as I was, Joseph had stopped me before I had raised the latch. "Stay," he said, seizing my arm, "what are you going to do?"

"I am going to accuse that woman now, once for all," I said. "I am going to have her turned out of the house at any cost."

"You must do no such thing," said Joseph firmly.

"Must not! Do you think I am going to stand idly by while *she* is being murdered! Good God! But let me go. I mean to do what I say."

Joseph released my arm. "Very well," he said, coldly, "Zen, in all mortal probability you will sign Mees Gray's dess warrant."

I looked back at him. "What do you mean?" I asked.

"I 'ave told you once already," he replied. "You cannot accuse a person of attempted murder like zis wizout proof. You 'ave no proof: not any at all. I sink zat loavely girl ees being damnably, treacherously done to dess—but I cannot prove eet now, 'ere to-day; much less can you do so. You might, you *might* if you did what you say, convince Mr. Dunn, or at all events frighten 'im sufficiently for 'im to send zat woman away; but you say 'e 'ees not friendly to you; 'e 'as already once declined to take your opinion about 'er; suppose 'e do so again—wat will 'appen? Why, zis, if we are right, if zat woman ees wat we sink 'er, she will see zat zere ees danger, she will 'urry up 'er plans, and while you look on 'elpless, Mees Grey will be dead. To' ang ze woman afterwards will not 'elp zat nice girl."

"Dead! For God's sake don't speak of it, Joseph!"

"Ah, but eet must be spoken of. And, listen to me. Suppose eet was not Mrs.

Cathcart 'oo do zis damnable sing ; suppose eet was someone else——”

“ Who ? Who ? ”

“ I do not know. I do not even say eet ees anyone else. I only say ‘ suppose. ’ Wat ‘ appens ? You get Mrs. Cathcart sent away and you leave ze way open to ze real poisoner to do wat zey want, wiz ze certainty zat if zere is any suspicion it will be on Mrs. Cathcart zat eet will fall. ”

“ Ah, you argue well, Joseph, ” I cried. “ But in your heart you know it is that woman. It can be no one else. ”

“ I do not know. I only sink, ” said Joseph calmly. “ But listen, come wiz me furzer down ze road. We do not want to be overheard. Zat ees better. Now be calm. Listen. You ‘ ave brought me to see Mees Grey, and she ees willing to take a leetle advice from me—more zan you are. I ‘ ave chatted wiz ‘ er. She ‘ ees a clever young lady ; she listens to me, and puts ‘ erself in my ‘ ands. We shall not tell Mr. Dunn just yet ; we shall ‘ ave a little secret from ‘ im. Do you put yourself into my ‘ ands too ? ”

“ You know I have the greatest faith in you, Joseph, but——”

“ Do you put your self in my ‘ ands ? ”

"I suppose so—yes."

"Very well. I am going into Windleton. Do you know why?"

"No."

"I am going to telegraph to a place zat I know of which ees a 'ome for trained nurses. At zat 'ome ees a nurse zat I know very well, and 'oom I can trust. By twelve o'clock to-morrow, unless she is at a case, she will be 'ere; by one o'clock, I shall 'ave seen 'er, told 'er wat to do, and sent 'er to Mees Grey."

"But Mr. Dunn and Sir Benjamin?" I said. "What about them? Surely it would be better to tell Mr. Dunn, at least, what you think. He would listen to you."

"Would 'e listen to me? It ees not sure, and Sir Benjamin—wat about 'im? Remember we doctors are tied down, friend Blackwood. Zere would be etiquette to be considered; zere would be delays; ze fat would be in ze fire. No, we will say nussing of our leetle plans, and fortunately eet will not be necessary. A friend of Mees Grey, 'oo 'eard zat she was ill, wrote to 'er a little time ago, and recommended 'er a nurse. Mees Grey mentioned zat fact to Mr. Dunn at ze time. 'E will not sink it very strange if she says to 'im zat she 'as decided to accept ze offer; and 'e will not know zat eet ees not



ze same nurse. We must leave it to Mees Grey to explain. If Mr. Dunn sinks it strange she 'ave decided so suddenly, eet cannot be 'elped—ze nurse will be already engaged, and eet will be too late to object. And why should 'e object ? ”

“ And you have persuaded Miss Grey to do this ? ”

“ Yes. Oh, she 'ees a sensible young lady. She listens to zose 'oo want to do 'er good.”

I thought a moment. “ I will leave everything to you, Joseph,” I said at last. “ You are right. Let us come quickly and send the telegram.”

“ Once my nurse ees 'ere,” said Joseph, as we went towards Windleton, “ sings will go smoozly. We shall know zen wat food and medicine Mees Gray takes, and we shall find out wat makes 'er ill. Ef zere are any proofs to discover we shall discover zem, and we can take our steps accordingly.”

“ But what about to-day ? ” I asked. “ What about to-morrow until the nurse arrives ? ”

“ I 'ave sought of zat. But, remember, friend Blackwood, bese for your sake and for ze sake of zat nice, pretty girl, I am putting myself in a very strange position. I do not mind, not I, for you are my very dear friend, and zat girl, I loave 'er ; but if

zat nice old Sir Benjamin could know it would make ze 'air stand up on is 'ead. Yes, I 'ave sought of to-night."

"What have you arranged, Joseph?" I asked. "Tell me anything that will set my mind at rest."

"I 'ave given Mees Grey somesing zat she will take if she feels any of ze symptoms zat are so bad come on again. As zere are men, friend Blackwood, zat do not like one anuzzer; as zere are animals zat are antagonistic to uzzar animals—so zere are poisons zat are antagonistic to uzzar poisons. For instance, atropine antagonises physostigmina; strychnine antagonises chloral; muscarine atropine, and so on. If Mees Grey ees being poisoned eet ees by a certain metallic irritant. Now zere ees a certain uzzar poison which 'ates zis irritant like—like, well, it 'ates 'im like poison, ha, ha; and wat ze first one does ze second one undoes, just as quick as you give 'im ze chance. Eef Mees Grey feels those disagreeable symptoms coming on zat frighten 'er so, before my nurse arrives, she will take a little of zis friendly poison and wat ze wicked poison 'as done 'e will undo. But she won't take 'im unless she feels ze symptoms, because we do not want to do 'er 'arm.

For ze rest, I do not sink zere will be any need to play wiz 'er preety leetle 'ealth, for I 'ave recommended 'er to leave off 'er medicine for a day, and to take a special diet until ze nurse arrives."

"But she does not know that she—she does not know what we suspect?"

"No, a thousand times no. We do not want to frighten such a nice girl. I told 'er zat it might be zat somesing zat she eat disagree wiz 'er, and she ees going to do wat I tell 'er until to-morrow. Zat ees all. She guesses nussing. And 'ere is ze post office ; now for ze telegram."

We parted after the dispatch of the message, with an understanding that I should call at Joseph's house at one o'clock on the following day, when he would have seen the nurse and given her his instructions.

I pressed his hand and thanked him warmly as I said good-bye, for I felt how much his interest and help meant to me. As far as human foresight could judge, Elsie was safe from harm for the next twenty-four hours, and after that time we should have a friend working for us at her side, a friend who would never leave her, day or night, and whom it would puzzle even Mrs. Cathcart to deceive.

\* \* \* \*

Two further incidents occurred to me during the course of the day, one ludicrous, the other rather sad. In pursuance of my late determination, I shall write them both down here.

As I walked slowly home from my interview with Joseph, I heard rapid steps approaching behind me on the road, and, turning to see who was coming, I recognized Brown, the village carpenter and builder, an enterprising tradesman who has made quite a name for himself of late by taking the contract of the building of a handsome Free Library which Mr. Dunn is presenting to the little town.

He touched his hat to me, and I was responding carelessly enough, drawing aside to allow him to pass, when something in the expression of his face and in his hurried manner struck me.

"Good day, Brown," I said, hastening my pace a little to keep up with him. "You seem in a great hurry. Nothing wrong with the Free Library I hope?"

He stopped quickly and looked at me in a dazed way. Then he took his hat and wiped his wrinkled forehead slowly. He is a man about fifty, fat, and very red in the face with the exertion of his walk.

"Anything wrong with the Free Library, Mr. Blackwood?" he said, at last, looking round him, still rather dazedly. "No, the Free Library's all right, sir. It's finished. That is it will be on Saturday, and opened the week after." He drew near to me, and took something from his pocket. "Here's the last cheque for the work, Mr. Blackwood."

I took the slip he held out to me and looked at it. It was a cheque for £25, drawn on a London Bank, and signed by Mr. Dunn.

"That's right, Brown," I said. "Well done. You deserve every credit for your enterprise in keeping the work in the locality."

Brown looked at me, wiping his forehead again. "Look at the cheque, sir——"

"Look at it! Yes, well? Not a very large amount for building a Free Library, is it?" I said jokingly.

"That ain't the first by many hundreds of pounds, I've had from 'im, sir," said the man, slowly. "It's been a good job, and I've done well out of it. It ain't the sum, sir; that's just for a few little extra jobs about the place. But look at the cheque; look at the corner of it."

I looked where his broad, square-tipped finger pointed, and started. In one corner

of the slip of paper were scribbled the letters R.D. "Good heavens!" I said, and then I laughed.

"Oh, I see, Brown," I said. "But of course there's a mistake somewhere. You surely don't imagine Mr. Dunn is in difficulties for £25?"

Brown took back the cheque, his face brightening a little and looked at it again. "I don't know what to think, sir," he said, at last. "It turned me all over dazed like when the Bank gave it me just now."

"Why, of course it's a mistake," I said. "Either the London Bank thought the signature unlike Mr. Dunn's usual one, or, well, there may be a dozen reasons. But surely you weren't imagining that one of the reasons could be that Mr. Dunn didn't possess £25, Brown. Why, he must have given thousands to Windleton alone within the last few months."

"Ay, and the Library has cost a pretty good lump of it, Mr. Blackwood. You've took a weight off my mind, sir. It must be a mistake, as you say. I'll just give it back to Mr. Dunn."

"If you are thinking of going to see Mr. Dunn now, I know, for a fact, that he is in town," I said.

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"Oh, well, it don't matter, sir. Any time 'll do. I'll get back to my work. I'm glad I met you, sir, and I'm much obliged to you. But you'll understand it did seem a bit queer to me, at first, about that cheque, sir."

I nodded to him and walked on, smiling to myself at the man's relief and the memory of his former anxiety. "Thank Heaven, I'm not a millionaire," I thought to myself, "to give away thousands of pounds, and then have my position doubted through an absurd mistake about twenty-five pounds."

The second incident occurred in the evening.

With my mind full of Elsie, I wandered out after dusk, across the road to the gate of The Elms, where I stood gazing longingly down the avenue, feeling that I was at least so much nearer to her and the happiness that the sight of her brought to me.

As I watched the house which loomed up dimly through the trees, I suddenly became aware of a dark shadow moving slowly across the lawn. Startled, I peered through the gate; and again the shadow crossed the sky-line.

With my mind full of the events of the morning and the suspicions they had bred, I opened the gate softly, and, creeping along

the inner side of the trees which bordered the avenue, I made my way silently towards the lawn.

Drawing near, I saw that a man was pacing swiftly up and down, his footsteps making no sound on the thick velvet of the turf, and as I approached, though very cautiously, I realized that it was Mr. Dunn.

In his eager march he gradually drew near to the spot where I was hidden, and alarmed now lest he should recognize me and request an explanation of my presence, I crouched low under the shrubs and held my breath.

I need not have feared, however, for my discovery, and this I recognized as I marked his quick, disjointed walk and bent, abstracted gaze.

Twice he passed me, and then suddenly, striking his forehead violently with his clenched hands, he stood for a moment looking up at the rapidly darkening sky. "My God!" I heard him murmur hoarsely, and then followed some words, muttered ejaculations, broken sentences that I could not catch, though I am sure I heard Elsie's name among them.

Harsh though I could not help considering he had been to me, I pitied him now



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in his distress, and wished vainly that my rashness had not imprisoned me there to watch it. "Poor fellow!" I thought, "I, more than anyone, can understand your thoughts; but Heaven grant that Elsie is not worse!"

Even while the wish passed through my mind, Mr. Dunn gave a harsh cry and with his arms raised towards the sky, sank upon his knees on the grass. Dark though it was growing, I could still catch the outline of his big, red face and thick lips, and I knew that he was praying swiftly, eagerly. Then his broad shoulders commenced to shake violently, and, ashamed to watch his emotion further, I turned my head.

"Elsie must be worse!" was the thought that came to my mind, "and yet, till to-morrow, I can know nothing!"

But relief came quickly. There was a sound of a window opening in the house; I caught a dim view of a white figure standing against the light now streaming from the gas-lit room, and Elsie's dear voice came through the darkness.

"Guardian! Guardian! are you coming?" she called across the lawn.

With a start and a shiver that shook his great frame from head to foot, Mr. Dunn

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raised himself to his feet and wiped his face. "Yes, dear, I am coming; I am coming at once," he cried. "But go in, go in and shut the window! The night air is bad for you, dear; go in!" And with a gesture that might have been one of despair, he moved slowly towards the house. As soon as he had entered and closed the window behind him; I escaped from my hiding-place, and hastened down the avenue.

"Poor fellow, how he feels her illness," I thought, forgiving him all his harsh treatment of myself as I remembered how good he had been to Elsie, and for how many years he had protected and cared for her. "After all it is hard on him. But why does he persist in believing in that woman and still keep her in his house! However, thanks to Joseph, the first step on the new road is taken. Elsie has not drunk her medicine to-night; she has kept to Joseph's diet—and she is better! Your course is shortening, Mrs. Cathcart, I fancy; your race is almost run!"

## CHAPTER XVII

**D**ARKER and darker grows the cloud which overhangs my darling ; closer and closer draw the meshes of the net of doubt and mystery which keeps me from her. " Mrs. Cathcart ? " " Mrs. Belton ? " Is this woman then—Good God, is it true, or am I going mad ? But why rack my brains, why torture my mind ; I shall know the truth to-morrow morning—I will—I must. Meanwhile let me keep to my determination, and follow incident by incident the record of to-day.

The nurse has arrived and I regret to say—it is useless to disguise it—she is a disappointment. To begin with, she is not Joseph's nurse, but a substitute sent by the Home to which Joseph applied, the nurse he particularly wanted being, as he thought possible, already engaged at a case.

Nurse Simpson, as the woman is called, has not had the fortune to impress very favourably either Joseph or myself up to the present. She is a person of about thirty-

five with a fat, white face, weak lips, receding chin, and a general air of rather flabby superciliousness. The only sign of character in her looks, and that not agreeable, comes from her eyes which, while small and badly coloured, are yet remarkable quick-moving and suspicious. And her tongue! In its capacity for pouring out a comparatively unending stream of wishy-washy anecdotes which could interest no one but herself, and on the face of it not even that, I have never heard it equalled.

When I arrived at Joseph's house this morning, she was already under weigh, and for half an hour afterwards she kept us weary, but polite listeners, while she regaled us with the history of half a dozen of surely the most uninteresting cases it can ever have been the lot of nurse to attend to. I have had a higher opinion, if possible, of the amiable nation to which Joseph belongs, since I watched his inexhaustible patience with that woman, and admired the manner in which he took advantage of the smallest hiatus in that almost interminable flow of speech to slip in his instructions and advice.

I think I helped him at last by getting up and pacing the room while yawning ostentatiously, but it was his mention of Mrs.

Cathcart and his hint that it would not be well to divide the task of looking after Elsie which finally gave us relief. The woman bristled up immediately. "I am not accustomed to allow anyone to come between me and my duties to my patient," she said, in quite a different tone, "unless it were another trained nurse with whom I might be sharing the case, or the doctor under whom I worked. And you can rely on the young lady having my undivided attention."

As I marked her rising colour and the vicious expression of her small, sharp eyes, I felt a sense of relief. Pride in her position of nurse, jealousy, evidently the strongest passion the mind of this woman could contain, would stand between Elsie and any other person and be security for her, or I was much mistaken.

She rose quickly, her little eyes still vicious, her pasty cheeks still lightly flushed. "Perhaps I had better go to my patient," she said, smoothing the white bow under her chin, "and thank you, Doctor Legrand, for so kindly explaining everything to me."

Joseph rose also, with an alacrity all his politeness could not entirely conceal, and showed her to the door where a carriage from The Elms stood waiting for her.

She listened to a word or two more from Joseph before she got into the conveyance, and then, for the first time, turned to me. "Good-morning, sir," she said, "I am sure I hope we shall soon pull the young lady round. I am sure I hope so." Her small ferret eyes fixed themselves on mine as she spoke, with a look that I felt somehow to be impertinent, and I could not refrain from flushing slightly, absurd though the action was. The woman knew I was no relative of Elsie's, and she must have seen that I was not, openly, at least, her *fiancé*; her little speech and the look in her eyes under ordinary circumstances would have been strange therefore, and showed me that my yawn had been noticed and not forgiven me. I fear the impression Nurse Simpson made upon me has been repeated in the impression I have made upon her, and I rather wish now that I had been more patient.

"Good 'eaven 'ow zat woman talk," said Joseph, re-entering the room, "my 'ead, my 'ead, my 'ead! I sink it is all buzzled wiz 'er talk. Eet ees a pity ze nurse I telegraphed for could not come, a great pity; but mark you zis woman knows 'er work; she 'as a testimonial from Leeves, ze great Leeves 'imself. And I sink she will look

after Mees Grey as well as annuzzer. Well, 'ave you 'eard anysing more of zat pretty, pretty young sing ? ”

“ Only that your advice has already brought forth good fruit,” I said. “ Miss Grey evidently did not take her medicine yesterday, and last night she was already better.” And I told him of my glimpse of Elsie. It was difficult to explain the incident to Joseph without at the same time describing my adventure in the avenue of The Elms in its entirety ; and when I found myself stammering in my unwillingness to make known to a third person what in reality I should not have witnessed at all, I gave up the attempt and told him all that I had seen.

To my surprise Joseph's brow clouded and he looked quite sad as I described Mr. Dunn's emotion, but he said nothing, and was soon rubbing his hands gaily at my mention of Elsie at the window.

“ Aha, see, see, now ! ” he cried, “ I told you she was a sensible young lady. She 'as done what I told 'er and zere she is, up quite late at night, and well enough to call across ze lawn. From ze symptoms she 'as 'ad lately, at zat time in ze evening she would 'ave taken 'er medicine and she would 'ave been feeling so sick, so ill—Ah, eet ees good,

friend Blackwood, but eet ees also bad, bad, bad."

"What do you mean? Ah, I see, you mean——"

He stopped me. "I would rather not say what I mean just for a leetle while. All ees going all right. Ze nurse is wiz Mees Grey by now. No one can give ze pretty lady anysing zat ees not good for 'er from to-day at all events wizout my knowing what eet ees, and soon she will be better. Meanwhile, we must try and find out who ees Mrs. Cathcart."

"I mean to go up to London to-morrow for that very purpose, Joseph," I said.

"By ze way," said Joseph, suddenly, "I am forgetting to show you a letter which I received zis morning; a very surprising letter. But one moment, do you 'appen to 'ave any shares in ze Standerton Traction Company?"

"Unfortunately, no," I replied, laughing; "I am not one of your millionaires. I know very little about the Stock Exchange, but I believe a very few of those shares would mean a very large income."

"Or in ze Frewenfield Tea Company?"

"Nor that either; but you had better ask Mr. Dunn about the companies. He is a



director of both ; in fact I believe he is practically both companies."

"I do not know nussing about such sings myself either," said Joseph, slowly, "and I do not want to. What little I 'ave is enough for me, and I would not for all ze money in ze world live ze life zese mean lead. My farzer was what we call gentilhomme, but 'e was a poor man. 'E 'ad two sons, me and my bruzzer. I was ze eldest and I went into ze army. It 'as always been so wiz us. But sings 'appened and I did not keep on wiz it, and 'ere I am now a leetle dam country doctor, wiz my 'teuf-teuf' and my leetle 'ouse and my books as 'appy as—as we are meant to be, friend Blackwood. But my bruzzer, 'e was different. 'E quarrelled wiz my farzer, changed 'is name, went on ze Bourse, ze French Exchange, and now 'e ees a big man in Paris. 'E lift ees finger and ze stocks go up ; 'e drop ees finger and ze stocks drop too. You may 'ave 'eard of 'im. 'Ees name is d'Arblay."

"The man who broke up the great fraud ? Good heavens, yes ; and that is your brother ?"

"Yes. And though I am poor and 'e don't sink much of me, 'e is fond of me in 'is way, Leon. 'E offers me money and can't

understand why I don't take eet. But zat ees not ze question. Eet ees ze letter zat I get from 'im zis morning zat I want to speak of. What 'e says to me ees so strange zat I must tell you of eet. Eet will interest you. May I?"

"Certainly," I replied, surprised.

"Well, leesten; 'ere is ze letter; no, zat ees not 'eet, zat ees a bill; zis ees eet. Eet ees written in English which 'e write and speak better than me, and 'e always writes so because 'e calls me a roast beef myself. It ees 'ees joke. 'Dearest Joseph,' so on, so on, so on; 'ere we are! 'I know you look down on us city men and 'ave a great contempt for our money which ees made 'arder and more 'onestly than yours (zat ees 'ees joke, too) and that you dislike what you call speculation, but nevertheless people are not always consistent, and were the temptation to come to you, you would probably succumb like ze rest of us. There ees always temptation in the neighbourhood of a very rich man, or a man who has the reputation of being very rich. A man like that is in your neighbourhood now, a Mr. Nicholas Dunn.'"

I started. "Mr. Dunn! How strange!"

"'Mr. Nicholas Dunn,'" continued Joseph, "'E is a very keen and clever man, one of

ze keenest and cleverest men in ze world of finance, and 'e 'as been a very successful man too, Joseph. One of the secrets of his success is zat to 'im all fishes, both leetle and big, are sweet and good. 'E 'as eaten many fishes, both leetle and big, and 'e 'as also made ze fortunes of many fishes, leetle as well as big. Eet ees for zis I am writing to you, for, steady-going old plodder zat you are, you might yet be tempted to try your luck in the net ; and if you won't take my money, I don't want you to lose the little bit you make by terrifying people's minds and poisoning their bodies.' (Zat ees 'ees joke). 'So listen to zis, Joseph. Mr. Dunn came to me the other day for a loan. It was a large sum, but not large for 'im and me, yet I refused it. You understand, *I refused it*. So if you sink of turning your pennies into pounds, dazzled by ze propinquity of 'ze great millionaire, keep zem in your stocking. I can't say any more ; I may be right, or I may 'ave thrown away a chance of making money. We shall see.' What do you sink of zat, friend Blackwood."

My thoughts involuntarily flew back to the incident of the Windleton builder and his cheque. Could it be possible that affair

had not been so laughable as I had supposed ? was it the straw showing the direction of the wind ?

" I don't know what to think, Joseph," I said at last. " You have amazed me."

" Yes, ees eet not ? But zere ees more. Leesten. ' Zere ees one sing which you can see for yourself,' my brother goes on, ' a sing which may say much to you, and which your knowledge will help you to verify at once. Mr. Dunn has till now always been the soberest and most abstemious of men. Of late I am told zat 'e drinks like a fish, but 'e does not drink what ze fishes drink. Look at him well next time you see 'im.' Now zat ees ze strange letter from my brother, and zat ees why I ask you whether you 'ave been speculating."

" I have not lately, Joseph," I replied. " Mr. Dunn did invest some money for me once, and he almost doubled it before he returned it, but of late I have done nothing of that kind. Indeed, I have not been on sufficiently good terms with him to think of it."

At that moment a patient was announced, and Joseph folded the letter up and put it carefully in his pocket. " You will not mention zis to anyone," he said, quickly.

"I 'ave told *you*, but we are friends, you and I."

I gave him the assurance, and thanking him for his confidence made my way out with a thoughtful brow. And no wonder, for he had given me something to think about.

\* \* \* \*

We have two deliveries of letters a day from Windleton, one at nine o'clock in the morning, and another at seven in the evening. To-day I was expecting rather an important letter in reference to a manuscript, which after many voyages seemed at last to have found a permanent home with an obliging publisher ; and having nothing better to do, I decided to go for an evening stroll and meet the postman on his rounds. There was another reason that decided me, too, and that was the man's route, rather a circuitous one, led him through the little wood where Elsie and I had often walked and ridden together. The walk is one I love, for every turn and step of it brings some memory of her back to me, and now that this dark cloud has come between us, memory is all I have to live upon.

Deep in my thoughts, sweet in spite of their sadness, I soon forgot the first object

of my walk, and it was with a start that I heard a voice calling to me, and, turning, saw the postman with a letter in his hand held out to me.

I thanked him, and took the packet carelessly enough, though I fully expected it to be the letter I awaited ; but a moment after the man had gone his way I gave an exclamation of surprise and pleasure. For a glance told me that the letter was from Elsie, of whom my thoughts were at that moment full, and the coincidence of its arrival seemed almost too delightful to be real.

Yet even as my fingers flew to open the envelope, something made me arrest their action, some vague feeling of doubt and mistrust passing from the letter through the envelope to my brain and making me hesitate to break the seal and read. For the packet was sealed, and heavily sealed ; by the weight of it there were several sheets inside. What could Elsie have to write me a long letter about, why was it sealed, and why sent by post when we were hardly a hundred yards from house to house ? Yet it was not these things alone which made me hesitate, I know ; it was some instinct, some consciousness deep down in my heart that we were at a crisis in our lives, she and I, and

that this letter once read, things could never be entirely the same again.

There was a little rustic seat not far from where I stood, and going to it I sat down, and arousing my will I opened the letter.

"Arthur, I never meant to write this letter to you ; I never meant to tell you the terrible, terrible secret it contains. I never meant to—and I was wrong. Oh, I half doubted when I made the determination, when the feeling was strongest on me that I never could tell you, never could speak the words looking into your face, never could write them down on paper for your eyes to read.

"Yes, now I know that I was wrong ; I have known it since I saw you again yesterday, since you held me in your dear arms and looked at me with your dark, handsome eyes, so full of love and trust, yet with such a sad appealing question in them. How nobly you kept your word, dearest ; how good and brave you are, how you love me, and how proud I am of that love, dearest, dearest, how proud I am ! Oh, let me call you dearest for this once ; let me tell you how proud I am to be loved by you, and how I return your love a hundredfold, how I shall

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love you till I die. Let me tell you, dearest, for it is for the last time. I can never say the words again ; you—you would not let me when you have read this letter ; when you have heard my story you will not want my love ; there will be a barrier deeper than the deepest sea between us, higher than the highest mountain. I told you what you wanted could never, never be, but woman-like (oh, forgive me, Arthur, I am only a girl), I would not tell you why. I would rather you had doubted my constancy, my faith, than let you know the truth. Since the other morning, since I looked into your dear eyes and saw their trouble, since you held me in your arms close, close, I see how selfish my thoughts were, how little I considered you. And since it is my love for you that has made me see the right path and take it, I will not let that love be degraded in your eyes. Though this letter will cost me your love for ever, dearest, you shall not at least doubt mine.

“Arthur, do you remember when I wrote to you to tell you first that I could never be your wife ; told you how, a broken-hearted, bewildered girl, I felt as if all the world I knew and loved had crumbled to dust beneath my feet. I had heard then, Arthur, the



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story I am going to tell you now, heard it and knew that it must separate us for ever. Yet, though that was my first thought, darling, it was not all of misery that my knowledge brought to me. The earthquake seemed to shatter not alone my future, but my past. Not only the bright vista of life with her lover which fills the thoughts of every girl who loves was blotted out for ever, but even my calm, happy childhood and youth seemed to have become dark and terrible to look back upon, though this I know can be but fancy.

“ Arthur, when I was so harassed and overwrought yesterday, and you were so good to me, I told you how I longed sometimes for a mother’s love and care ; I told you how often of late I have dreamed of her. Arthur, I was deceiving you even then. Ah, how can I ever tell you—— I do sometimes long for a mother’s love, and never more than now, but not for the love of *my* mother. I do dream of her constantly, but, Arthur, those dreams are nightmares that chill me to the heart, and from which I wake trembling and terrified. Were my mother to appear to me to-day in life, as she appears to me in dreams, I should fly from her, trembling and horrified as I have done a hundred times in

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sleep. I should ; I must. Yet should I ? Oh, should I ?

“ Arthur, do you know why I can never be your wife, why you must never see me, speak to me, be in the same room with me again ? My mother is a murderess——”

“ Oh, why was I not told ? Why was I allowed to grow up a happy, careless, selfish girl, and then told. Why was I allowed to meet you and love you ; to give you my whole heart in ignorance of the doom that set me apart from you and all my kind for ever—— And yet my poor, poor mother ! Arthur, all my life I have loved her. I have set her on a pedestal in my mind, imagined her as something pure and holy looking down on me from heaven——

“ Ah, you cannot understand ; no man could understand how I am torn in different ways, how awfully the suddenness of the blow affected me !

“ My mother ! I must love her, I have loved her since I could think of her and breathe her name ; yet in my dreams I shudder when I touch her hand. Think what happened to me, Arthur. I went to bed one night a happy, innocent girl, happier than ever before, for it was such a little time since I knew that I had gained your love.

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I think I prayed for my mother before I went to sleep, and looked up as I had so often done, with the fancy that she was smiling down on me. The next morning I was told——

“My mother is a murderess, Arthur, a murderess! Not one who struck a blow in the heat of sudden passion; but one who cruelly and in cold blood put to death another human being, an innocent man—and that man my father!

“Arthur, I can write no more. She lives, she is in prison. Poor, poor woman; for fifteen years she has suffered a living death. Before long she may be released. I am told that I shall not be allowed to see her, that long ago she renounced all right to me, that she herself wishes to be dead to me; but if I live I shall go to her when she is freed, and together we shall hide somewhere far away. If I live! but, oh, Arthur, how I hope sometimes that I may die.

“Can you understand now my cowardice in not telling you before, my poor, poor boy. I wanted to keep your love a little longer. Forgive me; I have told you now. I am a convict's daughter. I am the child of a woman who cruelly poisoned her husband. What man, even the lowest, would dare to

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marry me ? What man would I dare to wed ?

“ Good-bye, Arthur, forgive me, but do not quite forget me. Some day you will marry some girl who will be proud of your name and whom you can be proud of, but give a thought now and then to poor Elsie who loved you, and who only innocently caused you unhappiness.”

\* \* \* \*

When I raised my head from my hands, at last, after some seconds—minutes—I know not how long, and looked about me, I recognised the spot where I was seated, with a start. It was here that Mr. Dunn had knelt to Elsie that day when I had caught sight of them from the window of the hut. Recalling, piece by piece, the incidents of that scene, I came at length to the mad passion, the anger and despair, written on the features of Elsie’s guardian when she turned and left him standing there alone ; and the memory started a chain of thoughts that set me shuddering. Little by little, wave by wave, ray by ray, light seemed to break in upon the gloom that had darkened my thoughts for weeks ; but it was a cold, grey light that brought with it only fear. The big man’s furious, desperate face, Elsie’s slow,

lingering illness, Mrs. Cathcart's strange manner, the scene with her in the corridor, the builder's cheque, the warning from Joseph's brother, and, at last, this letter—ray by ray the light touched and illuminated all these as with a cold, bright finger, and under its dread revelation they seemed to take a fearful meaning.

The crumpling of the paper of Elsie's letter in my hand roused me at last. "Who is Mrs. Cathcart?" That was my thought as I read through her words again, studying each line; that was my thought as I walked home. And now as I sit here waiting for the morning that must bring me the knowledge that I wish for, the question is still running through my brain: "Who is Mrs. Cathcart?" It is under that doubt that the last link in the chain lies hidden. "Is she really Mrs. Cathcart? Is she Mrs. Belton? Is she——? But I will know, I will have it from her own lips to-morrow."

## CHAPTER XVIII

**A** MOST amazing, most startling thing has happened. What it means and whither it will lead I hardly even dare to think.

Without a word or sign, to all appearances secretly, at night, and taking with him the most important members of his household, Mr. Dunn has left The Elms and gone I know not where.

I slept little last night, and when I awoke it was still too early to think of going to The Elms ; so I seated myself at my window determined to wait till some sign should inform me that the inhabitants of the house over the way were rising for the day.

Some time passed but no sign came, and it began to strike me as peculiar at last that there should be no movement about the house, no windows opening, blinds drawn up, or servants going to and fro, though it was already nearly nine o'clock. With impatient eyes I gazed forth, watching in vain ; until at last, round the corner from the stables, came a groom. He was walking slowly, looking about him carelessly, as he strolled down

the avenue, and I saw that in his hand he carried a letter. To my surprise the man made straight for my house ; and suddenly aware that the letter must be for me, I hardly waited for him to reach the gate ; but ran downstairs to meet him.

He looked surprised, in his turn, at my rather startled manner, but handed me the note with a finger raised to his cap, and turned away. "I was told to give you this the first thing in the morning, sir," he said, turning back again. I hardly heard the words, however, for my eyes were fixed on the letter which I had quickly torn open ; and he went on his way again.

"SIR,—We are going away, all of us, to-night : Mr. Dunn, Miss Grey, the new nurse, Jennings, the cook, one housemaid, and the coachman. The other maids were sent to their homes this evening. By the time you get this we shall be gone. Where to ? I don't know. I have been turning something over in my mind of late, thinking, hesitating, in anxiety and doubt. I made up my mind to-night, and to-night I was going to write to you, not this letter but another one. I have a story to tell you, but I have no time to tell it now. But to-day or to-morrow I shall write it, and to-morrow or the next day you will read it. Read it carefully,

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every word of it. By that time I may want you to do something. God, who looks down on the weak and helpless, grant it may not be so, but if it be, act at once. Don't hesitate a moment if you love *her*."

That was all, there was no signature ; but never for an instant did I doubt from whom it came, and my brain whirled in a maze of wild conjecture. Mrs. Cathcart again ; but what did the letter mean, what was this decision she had come to, and what would this second letter she spoke of contain And this sudden startling blow of the departure that wrecked all our plans and care, what explanation could I find for that ? What explanation could there be but danger, sudden, unlooked-for, terrible, for Elsie.

I ran after the groom, who had hardly reached the road.

" I hear Mr. Dunn has left The Elms," I said. " Where has he gone ? "

The man, startled, stared at my white face and panting lips. " I don't know, sir," he said. " He didn't say."

" But some one at the house must know," I cried. " Go up and find out. But no, I will go myself, it will be quicker."

" There is no one at the house, sir," said the man, stopping me, " only my wife. She



and I have been left in charge. And I know she don't know more than I do."

"But good God, man, people can't go away like that!" I cried, wildly, almost unconscious what I said, and quite careless of the man's amazement. "You must know; someone must know! Mr. Dunn must have left word."

"He has not left word, sir," said the man, firmly. "He said he would send later."

I felt hurriedly in my pockets and pulled out some money, several gold pieces. "Take this, and for God's sake tell me what you can!" I said quickly. "You know me. I am a friend of Mr. Dunn and Miss Grey. There can be no harm in telling me anything."

The man hesitated, held out his hand, and then withdrew it. "It's no good, sir, I can't take it," he said, "for I can't tell you anything. I hardly know no more than you yourself."

I saw that he was speaking the truth, but I pushed the money into his hands. "Tell me at least what you do know, however little," I said, "and tell me all."

"Well, sir, Mr. Dunn was at home all day yesterday. He seemed a bit restless-like and walked about the place a lot. In the afternoon a telegram came for him; then another a little later on. After the second one, he sent for Mrs. Cathcart and told her to get

all the servants ready to travel. He gave them three hours to do it in, all except two of the maids, and they were sent home, as I say, sir, and my wife. Both the big Daimler cars were got ready, and after dark, about half-past nine they went off. Master, Miss Grey, the new nurse and the housekeeper were in one car ; the servants and luggage in another. The coachman and the horses went at daylight this morning ; but *they* have gone to the London house, I know."

"How was Miss Grey ?" I asked.

"Better than I've seen her looking for a long time, sir, and the new nurse with her. Master said nothing of where he was going, sir, no more did the young lady ; and no one else knew, I am sure."

"And you think no one else can tell me more than you ?"

"I'm sure they can't, sir. You see, sir, my wife was a bit curious and she took a step down to Windleton to see if she could hear anything, but no one there had even heard master was going away. Of course he may have gone to the London house, sir ; but I don't think he has, for him and the young lady never go in the motors to London."

For an instant I stood undecided, and then I nodded to the man. "Thank you,"

I said, "I am sure you have told me all you know. It is a pity, for I particularly wanted to see Mr. Dunn to-day." And I left him.

With a strange numbing fear at my heart, I felt there was no time to lose, but what was the first thing to do? I quickly decided. The next train left for London in an hour; I should have time to catch it; and hurrying indoors I prepared for the journey. It was, after all, whatever the man said, possible that Mr. Dunn had suddenly determined to go to the London house, and in any case London must be the first place for me to make for. If Mr. Dunn was not there, I might at least find some one in his house who could tell me where he was; and if I could not, there should be one man who could help me to trace him, and that was his co-trustee, Mr. Prothero, whom I had intended to see to-day in any case, and from whom I hoped to get some other information.

On my way through Windleton I found I had a quarter of an hour to spare, and decided to call on Joseph Legrand. He was out on his rounds on "teuf-teuf," but I wrote him a few lines to be given him on his return, and arrived at the station in good time. I am writing this in the train on my way to London.

## CHAPTER XIX

**I**T was evident that Mr. Dunn and Elsie had not come to London, for the blinds were all down at the big house in Queen's Gate, and the caretaker who opened the door to me on my arrival knew nothing whatever of the owner's movements. I had expected no better fortune, and taking a cab, I drove to the financier's club.

Here again I met with no success. Mr. Dunn was not in town, according to the hall porter, nor was anything known of his movements. There was nothing to do but continue my journey eastwards to Lincoln's Inn Fields and seek advice from Mr. Prothero.

I found my old friend just arrived at his office, and following him up the rickety old stairs of the building that had housed the firm for a hundred years, I made my way with him into his sanctum.

In ten minutes I had told him all, or nearly all the causes which had led up to my visit, and I soon saw, in spite of all his professional

coolness and experience, that I had startled and moved him deeply. He sat for some time buried in thought, his thin white fingers nervously playing with some papers on the table and his wrinkled old cheeks drawn and anxious.

"You have amazed me beyond words," he said at last. "Of some part of what you have told me I have had my own suspicions lately, but for the rest—had it been anyone but you, Arthur, who had told me, I should have said that you were the victim merely of a lively imagination; but you are not a hot-headed young fool likely to rush blindly to conclusions, and I can't question for a moment that you are justified in regarding the position as serious. But it is also difficult, extremely difficult. However, you have undoubtedly done the right thing in coming to me at once. Where is your friend Legrand?"

"At Windleton," I replied.

"He must remain there. If there is anything in what you suspect, we must be able to put our hands on him at a moment's notice. Will the line you wrote to him before you left be sufficient for that purpose?"

"Yes, I am sure of it," I said. "Joseph is entirely reliable."

" Good, then I will just send word along to a friend of mine who will find Nick Dunn for us. That can't possibly be a difficult undertaking ; and if it were, he is the man to carry it out. In any case that must be the first step. James, take this note at once to Mr. Jull. Have you ever heard of Jull, Arthur ? "

" Never."

" Ah, he is a useful man, Jull. Now that fool's gone, Arthur (he is a fool though I've kept him for twenty years), let us run over some of the chief points again. With regard to your amazing story of Mrs. Cathcart. To begin with, Mrs. Belton is free. She was released on a ticket of leave some months ago. As you have already guessed it, it is useless to disguise the truth from you any longer ; she is Elsie Grey's mother. I could not tell you before ; I was pledged to secrecy ; so was Nick Dunn. He, I, and she were the only people aware of the fact. He has broken his pledge : why, remains to be seen. You will remember that, when you came to me some time ago, I could not give you the information you desired. But I told you that, in my opinion, I did not consider that there was anything to prevent you marrying Miss Grey, supposing you to love her as a man should love

the girl he was about to marry. I am of the same opinion still. She is a good and pretty girl who would make anyone a worthy wife, and she has a very handsome fortune. As regards her unfortunate mother, you must remember that the woman had formally renounced all maternal rights to her daughter, that it was her wish that the circumstance of her parentage should be hidden from her, that only three people were aware of it, and that the secret had been kept for fifteen years. It seemed to me impossible, I must confess, that either of us three could ever have the slightest wish to break a silence which had been maintained so long. And I still think Elsie is mistaken in refusing you. It may be right that the sins of the parents should be visited on the children, my boy, but I am an old man who has seen much misery in the world, and I am not going to assist Providence myself to punish the innocent.

"Elsie is wrong," I said. "What she has written to me, what I have heard, has never moved me one inch from my love, from my wish to make her my wife."

"Whether Mrs. Cathcart is Mrs. Belton I cannot tell you, or what her object could be in taking up a position in Dunn's household. I have never seen the housekeeper, and Mrs.

Belton I only met once. She was a strikingly handsome woman,—that is all I remember, and I certainly should not know her again, nor, I imagine, would Dunn. In making her arrangements for Elsie's future she, very wisely, went right outside the ranks of her acquaintance ; and I must say, until to-day, I thought she had chosen well. Although, outside his care and love for Elsie, I have had my doubts about Nicholas Dunn of late."

"I had none ; I could not have, until this burst upon me. That a man for fifteen years should act as that man has, and then, if what we dread is true, sink suddenly to such depths of villainy, seems too incredible—too horrible to be true."

"My dear boy, the mistake the world always makes in judging mankind is to expect consistency in human nature, when the slightest amount of observation would show that it is the rarest quality it possesses. The world sees a man perform a certain amount of good, or brave, or clever actions. It immediately expects him to be always good, or brave, or clever ; and the amount of wicked, or cowardly, or stupid actions he can perform before he is eventually found out is marvellous. It sees a man bad, or weak, or stupid, and takes it for granted he must



always be so. The number of dogs that have been hanged through having had a bad name given them is greater than the number of those who have died a natural death, Arthur. Consistency ! What man who ever lived, but One, has been either good or bad, brave or cowardly, stupid or wise ! No, my boy, if what you tell me and what I have myself suspected are true, Nicholas Dunn is in a hole, and a deep one, too. What men like him will do when that happens to them, you have only to take up a file of newspapers to see. There have been one or two rather celebrated instances lately. Fortunately, or unfortunately, Elsie's money is safe. I know that. Fortunately, that he cannot touch it. Unfortunately, perhaps, because it may give reason for the terrible suspicion that has come to you and Dr. Legrand. But remember it is only 'perhaps.' And this is where the difficulty comes in. Let us take the worst view of the case. Let us suppose that someone is attempting, or has attempted (you say she is better, and precautions are being taken) to poison Elsie. No one commits murder for nothing : who is to benefit by this one ? Nicholas Dunn ? How ? On the face of it, he is not Elsie's heir. To make him that she must have executed a will in his favour. So

far as I know, that is a thing she has not done ; so far as I know, there is no will of hers in existence. She has always refused to make one, though I have begged her a dozen times. She has always refused me, but that is not to say, however, that she has not made one. Even in dealing with such a dry thing as the law, young ladies have strange whims and fancies, and it is possible, of course it is quite possible, that there is a will, and that it leaves Dunn master of her wealth. If not, it is certain that it is not Dunn who is poisoning her."

"Who then?"—I said slowly. Mr. Prothero's forehead furrowed, and for a moment he avoided my eye. "We won't go into the list of possible individuals," he said, at last, slowly. "There are some things that, did we not know what a place this world is, would seem too horrible to suggest. We must think what is to be done for the moment and leave conjecture alone. Unless I am mistaken, within twenty-four hours my man will have found where Dunn and Elsie have disappeared to. Possibly the explanation of the affair will be quite a natural one. In any case it was a clever idea to secure the services of the nurse and give her her instructions ; and it is fortunate that it did not come to you a week later."

"It was Joseph Legrand's idea," I said.  
"I can take no credit for it."

"It is on your friend that we must depend to a great extent in the future," continued Mr. Prothero. It is fortunate you asked for his advice. It is a great step to have the opinion of a medical man who has seen poor Elsie. It will put us in a position to act the moment we can find a motive for the crime. Listen, what do you think of Mrs. Cathcart's letter?"

"I hardly know what to think," I said.  
"It is as strange as everything else about this woman. But this morning I thought that——"

"Well, go on."

"I thought that she might have discovered that someone was attempting Elsie's life, or fancied she had discovered it, and that she was about to turn to me for help."

"That might be the explanation, or there might be another and a simpler one, as she may be Mrs. Belton or merely Mrs. Cathcart. In any case the letter she speaks of must be of importance, and I should advise you to be on the spot to receive it as soon as it comes."

"But I must do something. I cannot remain idle and in suspense," I said, quickly.

Mr. Prothero looked at me kindly. "My boy," he said, "I can understand what you

are feeling, and sympathize with you heartily, but I must beg you to see that for the moment there is nothing to be done but wait. Jull is capable of finding Dunn and Elsie if anyone in England is, and will probably put his hand on them before you have even decided which way to turn. Whatever other steps it may be wise to take, I, as a lawyer, can arrange easily and you could not at all. On the other hand you are the only person who can receive Mrs. Cathcart's letter, which may be of the greatest importance, and you can make certain that your friend Legrand is at our service when we need him. Will you take my advice and go back to Windleton, at least for the present?"

"On condition that you let me know the moment you have any news, and that I am free to prosecute inquiries there in my own way, I will return," I said. "I agree with you, that, for the moment, there seems nothing else to be done.

"It can be but for a short time," continued Mr. Prothero. "Eight or nine people, with a couple of big motor cars, cannot disappear as if swallowed by the earth, and you shall hear the moment Jull sends me news. Once we can get a sight of Elsie we can arrange that at least there shall be no further danger to her

life. It is a long time since she paid a solitary old bachelor a visit, and at the best Nick Dunn can't have been a pleasant companion of late. She won't refuse to come to me for a time."

"Ah, if she were only found and safe under your roof!" I cried.

"In twenty-four hours from now we shall have found her," said the old lawyer, patting my arm, "and then, if you ask my opinion, the sooner you marry her the better, Mrs. Cathcart or no Mrs. Cathcart. Even if the housekeeper should be Mrs. Belton, a woman who acted as she did at the time of her conviction is not likely to force herself unpleasantly upon you now. The very fact of her masquerade proves that."

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## CHAPTER XX

SO much has happened since I last took up my pen to continue my record that I hardly know where to commence, and sit gazing at the blank paper before me overwhelmed at the magnitude of my task.

Harassed and anxious, I returned home after my visit to London, wondering how I should get through the twenty-four hours in which Mr. Prothero had declared his man would find Mr. Dunn and Elsie. But two days passed and still no sign of success came to me from town, and my own efforts to trace the party from The Elms met with no better result. No word had as yet come to the caretaker and his wife, and none of the villagers whom I questioned discreetly seemed to have seen or heard anything which could give me an idea of the road the missing motor cars had taken. This in itself was not so extraordinary, as they had left The Elms after dark, at a time when most of the country people were in bed or shut up in their cottages,

and at night one motor car is very like another ; but it did seem strange that no word had as yet come from any member of the party, and it only confirmed the suspicion in my mind that the departure had been a flight.

That this flight had any immediate connection with Mr. Dunn's financial affairs did not however become apparent. To all appearances his name still stood high in the circles where he had always ruled ; and to take a small instance only, I had reason to know Brown the builder's cheque had been met on re-presentation.

It was not till the fourth day that my hours of suspense were ended, to be replaced by a time of terror and swift action that seems now like some wild and horrible nightmare as I look back upon it, and has left a cloud upon my mind that will take long to pass away.

I was called to my window that fourth day by the hurried gallop of a horse along the road outside, and looking out saw the rider pull his animal on to its haunches at my gate.

He flung himself to the ground, and throwing the reins over one of the shrubs at the side, he hurried up the path. Seeing that he had a packet in his hand, and knowing that news had come at last, I descended with beating heart to meet him.

He was a boy that I knew well by sight, usually employed on odd jobs about the station, and he was breathless and red in the face now, from the speed with which he had ridden.

"A package for you, Mr. Blackwood," he said. "Comes from Burley, Hampshire. The guard of the 4.15 told us to send it on to you as quick as ever was possible. He said his instructions was that it might be a matter of life and death, so I got on the miller's mare and come along."

I took the packet. "A matter of life and death." Heaven grant the words were spoken rashly! With trembling fingers I gave him a coin, and telling him to go to the servants' quarters for some refreshments, I hastened to my study and closed the door.

For a moment, after I was alone, I stood looking at the little package, literally afraid to open it. Then I tore the thick brown paper apart and read the letter that first tumbled out; for the packet contained two.

It was from Mrs. Cathcart.

"Sir," it ran—"The worst that I expected has come about, and helpless and lost I turn to you. If you fail me, may you never know another happy moment in this world or the next. But you won't fail me, or you wouldn't



be the man *she* loves. When you read this start instantly by the first train which goes to Burley in the New Forest, Hampshire. If a train does not leave in an hour engage a special ; bribe the porters, bribe the guards, do anything, spend any money, but leave at once."

I put down the letter unfinished and taking up a time table examined it. The nearest station to Burley was Holmsley Junction, three miles away, and the next train started in an hour. I rang the bell, ordered the dogcart round, and turned back to the letter.

"You will wonder why I write to you like this, why I expect you to do what I ask you. I will tell you. My name is not Cathcart ; it is Belton, as you thought. I am Elsie's mother, and she is being murdered. But she can yet be saved if you come at once. Now will you come ? I told you I was writing a long letter to you. I have written it. It is in the parcel with this. Read it as you come to Burley ; it will tell you more than I ever thought to tell human being ; but don't read it now."

Putting the letter and the package in my pocket, I ran upstairs, pushed a few things into a bag, took a hat and coat, and sprang into the dogcart. A quarter of an hour before

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the train was due, I was at the station, and a few minutes later I was on my way to Holmsley Junction. But in that few minutes I had written and dispatched a note to Joseph Legrand, explaining what had happened and telling him to follow me at once.

The carriage into which I had sprang was a first class one, and empty. By arrangement with the guard who knew me well, I contrived that I should have it to myself for the hour or so which the journey would take, and as the train steamed out of the station on its way to Hampshire, I broke the seal of the second letter.

## CHAPTER XXI

**I** HATED you (the letter ran) as I hate anyone who can see her and speak to her and not be compelled to hide the love they bear her, to beat it down when it rises to their lips, to crush it back into their overflowing hearts. I hated you as I hated everyone who knew her ; everyone but *him*, who for fifteen years I have prayed for night and morning, whom now an evil spirit has changed into a fiend blacker than the pit to which he goes.

I hate you a little still—you have not given me much cause to love you, have you ? But I turn to you, because she wants you, and I would cut off my right hand to gratify her slightest whim, and because I don't know where else to look for help.

You will be in the train when you read this ; you will have followed my instructions ; you will be coming to me fast, fast as the steam can carry you, won't you ? Oh, God, you won't fail me !

I am Elsie's mother, and she is being

poisoned, and I can't save her. That devil has laid a trap for me and caught me, and now I am helpless and *she* is at his mercy. Ah, curse him ; curse him ! If you don't come ; if you don't come—— Wait a minute, give me a minute ; my head is swimming in a sea of violet flame, and the beating of my heart makes the pen rattle in my hand. Wait a minute——

I am better, I shall be cool and calm now. Don't be afraid. I have knelt down and said a prayer. I can tell you everything clearly and quietly now, and you can think out the way as you come along. I will tell you my story from the beginning, a story I never thought to tell to human soul, and you will save Elsie's life. I know you will. I have been told so, just now, on my knees.

\* \* \* \*

I am Mrs. Belton. My name before I was married was Glandyne : Esther Glandyne. My mother, fortunately for her, died when I was a baby, and I spent my early life, an only child, with my father on the borders of Southampton Water near Hythe. When I was about fifteen my father died, too, and I went to live with some neighbours and friends of ours, Lord and Lady Holme at Holmworth Park, near by.~~~Elsie Holme, their only

daughter, had been my dearest friend as a child, she was my bosom companion then, she has been an angel to me ever since. There is not a woman like her in the world.

Lord and Lady Holme cared little for society or entertaining, and we girls were allowed to live the life which pleased us best, riding about the forest, exploring the country, reading together the books we loved, or walking arm-in-arm through the Park, chatting of a thousand girlish things. Ah, what happy innocent days those were, how we both look back upon that happy time with love and gratitude to the kind people who gave it to us.

When we were about eighteen an event occurred which was destined to alter all our lives. Near us was a large house which had been for many years unoccupied, and about the grounds of which Elsie and I used to wander freely. One day we heard that this house had been sold, and that the purchaser was coming to occupy it. He was reputed to be a young, handsome and very wealthy man. His name was Belton.

The idea of this new arrival, and speculation as to his appearance and character, took a large place in our minds from that day. Of course, girl-like, we decided that

he would fall in love with one of us ; and we quarrelled gaily as to which should be the favoured one. I wonder my tongue didn't blister with the innocent, careless words I spoke at that time ; I wish I had dropped down dead at Elsie's feet when first I heard that news which caused us so much excitement.

Mr. Belton arrived and we met him frequently. We could not help doing so, for he was almost the only young man in the neighbourhood. We took to him at first sight. What girls, brought up as we had been, and of our age, would not have liked him ? he was young, handsome, gay, and enormously wealthy. He had been everywhere, seen everything ; possessed yachts, horses and dogs which were superior to any we had ever seen ; did everything well ; and with it all had a charming, frank, simple manner which was irresistible.

Lord and Lady Holme, knowing nothing of him, liked and admired him ; Elsie almost worshipped him ; I, I loved him at first sight. Within a month we were engaged ; in three we were married, and I had said good-bye for ever to my happy girlhood.

I have no one but myself to blame that when I married this man his character was a sealed

book to me. I saw what was on the surface and I loved that. I never looked beneath; heaven knows, infatuated as I was, if I should not have married him even if I had. There was no one to tell me what the step was which I was taking; Elsie, without loving him, was almost as infatuated as I myself. Lord and Lady Holme, dear simple folk, living out of the world, made the usual necessary inquiries and found them absolutely satisfactory. How could they do otherwise; who speaks ill of a young, handsome and good-natured man who has an income of ten thousand a year! They gave me the handsomest presents and their blessing, cried a little over me, and considered me, like the rest of our little world, the luckiest of girls.

Yet the man I had married was a drunkard even then, was dissipated as, I hope and think, few English gentlemen are in these days, and was as false and selfish under that frank exterior as he was on the surface gay, handsome and charming.

Do I wrong him? Am I too harsh after all these years, now that I know the world? I want to make you think the best of me, of Elsie's mother, for her sake, but heaven help me, I don't think I am.

The blow did not fall, the crash did not

come suddenly. For months I was happy. I adored him, and he loved me in those days. For a long time even to my girlish and romantic eyes, he was all that I could wish.

I will spare you the story of my disillusionment. It was gradual, it was horrible, it wrecked my life before I was twenty.

I discovered first that he drank. That is a fault women will forgive in the man they love ; look round you, you will see it every day. I forgave him and tried to cure him. If I ever could have done so it was then too late. The vice, unchecked for years, save by his few months' love for me, had grown till it was part of him and far stronger than my poor love. Then Elsie was born, and he tired of me, and tiring added infidelity to the other griefs I had to bear. A woman doesn't forgive that, but she bears it sometimes. I bore it. I tried to make excuses for him. He loved society, and the set he had always lived in was the fastest of its time. The life I had led with Elsie and dear old simple Lord and Lady Holme, had not fitted me to vie with the women he met daily, or to please the men who were his constant companions. I could not laugh, talk, gamble, dress as those women did whom he admired, I, who had spent half my days on horseback, and never given more



than five guineas for a dress in my life but my wedding frock, who knew nothing of cards, and loved the books that I had been taught to think the best of their kind. Compared with these women I felt he had no pride in me ; in the presence of those men I felt myself shy, cold, a little *gauche* even ; and I turned more and more to my home and my child, Elsie, whom I named after the companion I had loved so well.

Some husbands would have left me to myself, contented with their freedom, and gone their own way. He could not, though the love he had borne me had long turned to contempt, I know. There was some strange trait in his character that made a person unbearable to him who did not see with his eyes, at least on the surface, and hear with his ears. For many years the world had done its best to spoil him, and had developed in him an imperious will which not only could not brook opposition, but could not even bear to see another going a different way. I tried to force myself to be what he wished me ; I tried to obey him in all he asked—and I failed. On the surface I succeeded sometimes in imitating the women he admired ; underneath, I was always the girl who had grown up side by side with Elsie Holme. I could not

change my nature, and he saw it. But unaccustomed to be thwarted, he would not give in ; and he set himself to break me. I believe, oh, I believe, that in those days he was not himself : that the horrible vice to which he was addicted had warped and poisoned his nature ; that he did not really know what he was doing.

One day he put the crowning insult upon me ; he invited one of his mistresses to stay in my house, at a time, too, when Elsie Holme was with me. It was Lady — a well-known person in his set, one of those women who spend three thousand a year on dress while their husbands have not as many hundreds. I was rude to her and she left. Furious and under the influence of drink, he insulted Elsie in my presence. Heart-broken for my sake, yet frightened, she cut her visit short, and I knew that she had crossed my threshold for the last time.

After that he broke down all restraint——let me hasten to the end. He had one innocent pleasure ; it was photography. On one occasion, when he was more drunk and brutal to me than usual, I lost control of myself and bursting into tears wished that I was dead and at rest for ever. With a sneering gesture he pointed to one of the bottles

of chemicals connected with his work. "Curse you," he said "there's some cyanide there. Drink it and you'll drop dead. If you want to, why don't you? I shouldn't mourn for you; but don't try and frighten me with your cursed howling."

I looked at him, but there was not a touch of shame or remorse on his furious face. "You are drunk and you don't know what you are saying now," I said slowly, "but perhaps, some day, I will do what you want. Perhaps, then, you will remember your words."

He struck me down at his feet, and going to his room, was found intoxicated and senseless later on by the servants. I went to the bottle he had pointed out to me, and looked at it. How willingly I would have died, heaven knows, but what about my child? However, I took the cyanide and locked it up in my room.

Things went from bad to worse. Sometimes I thought of flying and taking Elsie with me, but I had no money, though I was a rich man's wife, and I knew so little of the world. Where could I go? I loved my dear friends too much to bring them into open collision with that furious and reckless man. And I stayed on. I wonder my hair did not

turn white ; I wonder my brain did not give way under the stress of that time.

One day he announced his intention of going for a cruise in the Mediterranean in his yacht. He asked me to go with him. I refused. I knew why he wanted my company. That woman, Lady —— was to be one of the party. He struck me, but I still refused. The child, Elsie, was there in my arms. "Very well," he said, at last. "If you won't come, I will take Elsie. She's always good fun, and Maud likes her ;" Maud was Lady ——

"You wouldn't do that ?" I cried, "you wouldn't take my child away with that woman !"

"By hell, wouldn't I ?" he said. "You don't consider me ; why should I consider you ? I thought of doing it some time ago to punish you, and now, after this morning, I'm damned if I don't. Come here, Elsie."

I caught the child close into my arms. "Leave her, leave her ; you shall not touch her," I cried.

With an oath, he crossed the room, and seized Elsie's arm. I had to let her go, or she would have been injured. But she was frightened, and screamed.

"Damn you, you little beast, you're like your mother," he cried, "you hate me, too,

do you ! Well, you shall come with me all the same. And take that to stop your crying ! ” And he boxed her ears. The blow was not a hard one, but it roused me to madness. Callous as he was, he shrunk from me as I faced him, and snatching Elsie from him fled from the room.

Can one short minute alter all a person’s character ? Yes. That instant had changed me from a good woman to a bad one.

For hours I never left my room, hardly moving except to glance at Elsie who, tired out with sobbing, had fallen asleep on my bed. For hours I sat there watching the day pass into evening and die away ; and as I sat the dread resolve came into my mind, and grew and grew.

Night came on, and I heard the servants shutting up the house ; I heard them seek their quarters ; I heard *his* uneven footstep pass my door as he made his way to bed. Then I went to my cupboard and took down the bottle of cyanide.

My room communicated with his by a door which I locked as I heard him come along the passage ; locked it and stood by it, motionless and silent like some marble figure of death, waiting.

I heard him undress, cursing me as he

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stumbled about his room ; I heard him go to bed ; I waited through the long spell of tossing about and restless, fevered movements that preceded sleep ; and then the silence told me the time had come.

I opened the door, unlocking it noiselessly, and crept into his room. He had not turned out the light, and it shone on his flushed and fevered face as he lay asleep. By his bedside stood the jug and tumbler of water I had known I should find there. I knew how often in the night he would rise half-conscious and pour glass after glass of water down his parched and burning throat.

I filled a glass from the jug and poured some of the cyanide into it, more than enough, and put it by his side. Then I turned and looked at him : he was lying on his side with his face to me and one arm underneath his head. I had watched him asleep like that and kissed him a hundred times in the early days of our marriage. As I looked at him now the memory of those happy times came back to me, and involuntarily I stooped to look closer at him. His face was flushed, but as he slept it looked innocent as a child's (he was still a very young man) and over his lips hovered a little smile. As I bent over him, as I am a living woman, he murmured my name in his sleep.

With a flash, consciousness came back to me, and I saw the black gulf that yawned before me. I shrieked aloud, and caught up the glass to dash it to fragments, when he woke and started to his feet and looked at me—from me to the glass and back again.

Then gently, without a word, he took the tumbler from my fingers which were icy cold and stiff, and smelt it.

"The cyanide," he said, slowly, "my God, Esther, *you* !"

I stood like a frozen statue, looking at him, dumbly, and I saw that the consciousness of what he had done to me had come to him, for his head sunk suddenly on his breast.

"The cyanide !" he repeated, as if half unconsciously. "*You*, Esther ! My God, have I been as bad as that !"

I could not have spoken ; I could not have moved though the earth had opened at my feet, and I saw his lips tremble suddenly. "My God, you are right," he cried suddenly, "and I shall do worse still if I live. Forgive me, Esther. I'll do the only thing that's left me !" And with a gesture so swift that I had no time to arrest his hand, he drank the contents of the tumbler.

Do you believe me ? Would anyone have believed me ? I don't know. You are the

first person I have told. Why did he do it, he who treated me as he had done? Explain it how you can. Sometimes I think that waking suddenly from his drunken sleep, delirium had touched his brain and that at the moment he was mad. At other times I feel that the sight of my girlish figure standing there frozen with the fear and horror of what I had done, and the memory of the bright and innocent child he had married, struck him with sudden and irresistible remorse——

But I told no one the truth, or rather I *did* tell them the truth : I was his murderess. Not for an instant did I doubt it then ; not for a moment do I question it now. I went into his room that night determined to kill him, and I did kill him. Had I not taken the poison there he might be alive now ; had I not stood there, a dumb frozen reproach to him, he would not have drunk it. My shrieks aroused the house, and when the frightened servants ran in, I told them I had poisoned him. It was all I said during the trial ; it was all I said ere the judge passed sentence.

Yet, though I kept silence, a little of the truth came out. Elsie Holme and her parents knew something of my married life ; the servants could not be kept from talking. My dear old friends worked night and day for me,



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though I prayed them to let me die ; and in the end my sentence was commuted to one of penal servitude for life.

\* \* \* \*

I have not time, nor if I had would I tell you the story of my life in prison. Imagine a delicately-nurtured girl—I was no more, though I was a mother—sent to that hell upon earth, solitary confinement in a county jail ; then turned in to herd with the beasts in human shape, who form the greater part of the population of a convict prison. Imagine it, and then carry your memory back to me.

You don't like me, do you ? Few people do. Almost everyone who meets me takes a dislike to me, and even to those who do not go so far I seem strange and uncanny. I am secret in my movements, soft-walking and mysterious, am I not, and I cringe when people speak to me suddenly, while in my eyes, I have been told, there is a look of fear. It was the first week did that. The rest changed me, hardened me, brutalized me, altered me in many ways, but the first week did that.

How did I live through it : why did I live ? My child ! It was the thought of her that kept me alive, though my first step was to

make certain that she was dead to me for ever. Of one thing I was determined ; from the moment the prison doors closed on me, one resolve was in my mind : Elsie should never know who or what her mother was.

I have said that the blow *he* gave Elsie turned me in a moment from a good woman into a bad one. It is true, but for that one resolve. From the moment of my conviction I turned from the kind friends of my youth as I turned from every pure and innocent thought that connected me with them ; and all that they would have done for me, I refused. Where was I to look to secure the future I wished for Elsie ? Fate guided me.

Among my husband's friends was one, the only one, who had taken a firm stand against the course of life he was leading, and who had warned him plainly whither it must lead. This man, though older than he, had for many years been his most intimate friend. They had quarrelled, however, at last, in consequence of my husband's mode of life, and had ceased to see each other for some time before my marriage. My husband, however, had often spoken to me of this friend, during the first happy days we spent together, in terms of the highest admiration and respect ; and it was to him that I determined to appeal.

My case, my miserable trial, had created what is called "a great sensation" at the time of its occurrence, and the papers were full of it. Many of them published my portrait. I was—why should I not say so? I have little enough vanity left me now—at that time better looking than the majority of women, and many people, utter strangers to me, pitied me, and took sides for me. I suppose this man, too, was sorry for me, the more perhaps that he knew something of my husband's life. He listened to my story which I wrote to him from prison, and he granted my request. He was a wealthy man, but a lonely one, and he undertook to receive Elsie into his home and bring her up as if she were his own child; and he swore to me that she should never know the secret of her birth. He refused, however, to take the entire responsibility of her father's fortune which passed to her. The question of a second trustee was an easier matter, and we chose a Mr. Prothero, a member of a well-known firm of lawyers, and a man who had once or twice acted for my husband. He also was sworn to secrecy, which he nobly kept. I formally renounced all right to Elsie, and the thing was done. From that moment my child was dead to me, my

last link with the world was cut, and my prison life begun.

How those fifteen years passed I could tell to no one. Even to look back on them turns me white and sick. If I dream of them I wake startled and trembling in my bed ; if I hear a door bang even now, my heart seems to stop beating ; if anyone speaks roughly to me I shake with physical terror.

Elsie was dead to me for ever. I knew that ; I had made it so myself ; and when the thought of her came to my mind, as it did at first, a thousand times a day, I crushed it down in my heart, I forced it from me. I would not think of her. Yet I did, and at the back of my life deep down in my heart was the thought that that man was taking care of Elsie and loving her and guarding her. In the wickedness and hardness that filled my soul in those days I never thought of God, but I thought often of Nicholas Dunn, and I worshipped him as never a man has been worshipped since.

Of the people I met daily in my prison life, some were kind to me, some cruel. I hated them all, but I hated the kind ones most. They reminded me of things and people I wanted to forget ; and I was worse

after someone had attempted to do me a gentle action than when I met with some petty insult or aggravation from one of the warderesses or my fellows.

But one man who was kind to me I hated more than any, good or bad. It was the chaplain of the prison. When I think of that man's patience and goodness to me, and remember how I insulted and reviled him, how I hated and thwarted him in every way, I know that there lives one Christian in the world. Till lately I had thought that there were two.

He came to the prison eight years after I entered it, and for seven long and weary years he never gave up the hope that some day I should show what he called my "true nature," and repent. He was an old man, with white hair and a nervous twitching of the lips, which I used to imitate to his face in my desperate moods.

One day I heard that I was about to be released. My conduct had not been good, but kind friends who had never forgotten me had worked for me in the dark, and the order came.

From that moment there was but one thought in my mind—Elsie! Waking and sleeping she filled my brain, and my sole idea

was, how soon I should see her. Not that I meant to break the long, long silence, or imperil the secret that had been kept so faithfully and well. I would sooner have died than that, far, far sooner. But to see her, to get one glimpse of her, ah, if I could do that!

The chaplain came to me and asked me if there was anything he could do for me. He dreaded the effect the news might have on my ill-balanced nature; but he found me a different woman from the one he had known. "Get me books to read," I said. "I mustn't think, or I shall go mad, I am so happy. If you want to be kind get me books that tell of a mother and her daughter."

"I will, with pleasure, poor mother," he said (I saw how my changed manner delighted him). "But may I—will you let me bring a Bible with them?"

I shook my head, "No, no; bring me the books," I said.

He brought them; and for every moment that I was allowed I revelled in and loved them. There were a dozen tales among them of mothers' love and mothers' sacrifices, but the one I read most was *East Lynne*. I went through it again and again, and when I put it down finally, I sat for days

buried in thought. A new idea had come to me, an idea so startling and wonderful that I seemed to go through life in a dream, unconscious of all around me. I was unknown to Nicholas Dunn, he had never even seen me ; I had only met Mr. Prothero once ; Elsie was a child of four years old when I had last held her in my arms ; no one else had even an idea that I was her mother. If only I could obtain admittance to Mr. Dunn's house under any pretext, I could see my child daily and with a tenth of the danger that Lady Isabel Carlisle had run. I would take any position, however menial ; I would be a servant, a charwoman ; but was it possible ?

As the day drew near for my release the chaplain became more pressing in his endeavours to turn my thoughts the way he wished. He felt that he had failed with me, and he saw me slipping from his care still hard and unrepentant ; and he redoubled his efforts. They were useless. True, my heart was softer for my new-born hopes, but my mind was too full of Elsie and my secret plans for any other subject to enter there. Yet I saw his distress, and one day I almost pitied him.

" Is there nothing will move you, you poor

lost soul," he cried one day. "Nothing that will turn your thoughts towards Him who suffered so much Himself and was never hard."

I had my back to him and was carelessly opening and shutting the volume of *East Lynne* which lay in my lap. I turned to him suddenly.

"Yes, there is," I said slowly. "Pray that I may be successful in what I want to do when I get out of prison. If God grants that, I will believe in Him again, and be what I was before—before I came here."

He sighed and buried his face in his hands for a moment or two. When he looked up there were tears in his eyes. "I cannot pray that," he said. "I cannot tell whether your wish is good or bad. But I have prayed for you, and if God wills He will give you what you wish. If so, may He also grant that, like many another poor wretch, you never repent asking for it."



## CHAPTER XXII

**M**Y wish was granted. Almost at the prison gates I was met by Elsie Holme, now Lady Rexworth. She has been married six years and is perfectly happy with her husband and children. She has never forgotten the friend of her girlhood though, and the moment I was free she was by my side ready to love me and care for me, ready to take my part against the world. But I loved her too well to let her do much for me ; I knew in my heart that I was no longer worthy to be her friend. Elsie had never really believed me guilty of that crime ; she considered that ill-treatment and misery had turned my brain ; that my declaration was the mirage of a diseased mind ; and while I could not undeceive her—indeed the subject was not mentioned between us—I felt that we could never be intimate again.

When she saw that my resolve was fixed she yielded, only begging me to tell her what there was she could do for me.

“ There is one thing you may be able to

do," I said. "I will tell you in a few days. It may be in your power to make me the happiest woman in the world, and I will go down on my knees to bless you ; but I cannot tell you yet."

She wept in my arms, and we parted.

In a week I returned to her. During that time I discovered that Mr. Dunn, now a very wealthy and influential man, was on terms of intimacy with both herself and her husband. She even knew my Elsie and loved her, without the faintest suspicion that her unfortunate mother had been her dearest friend.

While this made the success of my plans more easy in one way it increased my difficulties in another, and for a long time I hesitated whether to tell her the whole truth or not. But I decided that I could not. For fifteen years one idea had ruled my life ; in one determination I had never wavered : Elsie's future should never be darkened by the knowledge of my sin ; and in this case I was not sure of my old friend. She would at least, I knew, have no secrets from her husband, and I hesitated to let two more people know the story of Elsie's parentage. "My desire is a good one and an unselfish one," I decided, "and my wish

to be near her and see my child sometimes is a pure and holy one ; if the chaplain was right in his teaching, God will grant it, and I can keep my secret still."

Without telling Lady Rexworth my reasons, I let her know that my heart was set upon obtaining a situation in Mr. Dunn's household. She trusted me implicitly, as she always had ; she put her honour at my disposal, and in a month I was installed as housekeeper in Elsie's home.

That very night I wrote to the chaplain of the prison, and told him my wish had been granted. " You are a good man," I said, " and I believe." Then I went down on my knees.

\* \* \* \*

You have seen Elsie and you love her. Can you imagine what *I* felt when *I* first saw her and heard her voice after fifteen years of the life I had spent ? My first feeling was one of utter abasement before such loveliness and purity, and joy that I had kept my secret from her ; my second, adoration and reverence for that man who had tended her and brought her up to be what she is. I could have knelt and kissed his feet ; I could hardly keep my love and gratitude from bursting from my overflowing

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heart ; if I could have suffered tortures for his sake, I would have been glad. And she, Elsie ? Ah, the pitiful little excuses I used to make to be in the same room with her, to hear her talk and see her smile. How I wept sometimes when I saw that my strange appearance, my secret, timid manner, turned people against me, and feared that she might turn against me too. Ah, how unjust I was to her sweet and gentle nature. Do you know that she has almost grown fond of me. I startled her a little at first ; she was timid and nervous of me, now she smiles kindly on me, and sometimes of her own accord she pats my hand when I am smoothing her pillow.

\* \* \* \*

I hated you when you first came to the house ; I hated you when you took her out riding and were always with her ; for you took her away from me. I hated you when I saw that she was growing fond of you ; you were stealing her love from me, the love that I had hoped so much to win. I hated you when I saw her growing thin and pale, for I thought you were treating her badly and being cruel and unkind to her. I would have killed you sooner than let her come to my fate.

\* \* \* \*

Do you remember that night in the passage outside her room. It was then that the first suspicion came to me. You were hard, you were cruel that night, but you weren't so cruel as I thought you, for I saw that what I had suspected you suspected too, and you set me on the right road.

Yet you frightened me terribly. You had got to know in some mysterious way what no one else even suspected ; you were furious against me, and you were going to have me turned out of the house. Do you know that for hours that night I lay senseless on the floor of my room, and that for hours afterwards I was mad, mad with fright. You thought, as I had, that Elsie was being poisoned, and you were going to tell them that I was a convicted poisoner. You were going to have me turned out of the house and leave her at the mercy of some devil ; and you were going to tell them who I was, and that *I* was trying to poison *her*.

God helped me again. Your plans fell through. You did your worst, and failed. Yet what you did do gave a fiend in human shape the chance to torture me as I have never been tortured yet. There have been times since I have left prison when I feared my brain was going to give way, when it

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would have done so but for the help of Dr. Legrand of Windleton, who is so kind and clever ; but of late!—— I don't know how I have lived through it.

Time passed and I saw that you and not I had been banished from the house. Elsie grew better for a day, and I almost began to hope that I had been mistaken. Oh, it was so hard for me. I was only a servant. I knew so little of what was going on. I could do so little to make sure. I could only be near her as much as possible, and watch everyone and pray. Fortunately she pitied me, and let me wait upon her and be with her often.

Do you remember when you brought Dr. Legrand to see her, and found me pacing up and down the passage outside the room where she was? You know now why I was there ; you can guess what I was feeling. You were rough and harsh with me again, but I restrained myself, for in my heart I loved you for bringing that kind, clever man to see her. Yet such strange things are women that I was jealous of you even then, jealous that you could do things for her, while I could only watch helplessly, and pray.

Yet my prayers were answered, and I

who seemed so helpless discovered the truth before you did.

I have told you what my feelings were towards that man who, during all my prison life, had cherished and guarded Elsie, to whom I owed it that the fresh and lovely innocence of her gladdened my eyes, sick for a sight of her after fifteen waiting years. I told you how I placed him above all other men in my heart, how I thought of him more than I thought of God, how I would have knelt at his feet and kissed them. How was it then that the suspicion came to me at last, came in a horrible blinding flash that turned me sick with dismay and dread. I cannot tell you. I can put my hand on no one incident and say "there was the cause"; I can only say it came to me suddenly, instantly, with a certainty that was irresistible, and I knew. Another woman in my place, knowing what that man had been for fifteen years, would have believed herself mad even to harbour the thought. I *knew*. God sent the knowledge to me. He answered my prayers.

What has changed that man from the angel who guarded *her* to the devil who would murder her; what changed me fifteen years ago from a good woman to a bad one?

Ah, who can explain God's mysteries? We only know that such things are. Whom He wishes to ruin He first sends mad. How many poor wretches in sorrow and despair have tested the meaning of those words.

I set myself to watch him, remorselessly, without sense of honour or pity, and I caught him. He has been drinking furiously of late and he is on the verge of frightful ruin. With the underhand means that my position in the household gave me I soon discovered that. Then I found that Elsie's medicine always passed through his hands. He invented orders of special preparations for himself, and under this excuse commanded that the chemist's parcels should always be taken directly to his study. Then I noticed that Elsie seemed stronger and better on the days when he was called suddenly to town. I stole the keys to his papers; I opened his letters—one learns much in a convict prison—and I seemed to see that as the fluctuating condition of his fortunes varied so Elsie's health went up or down. Heaven help me, he was playing with her life as men play with stocks and shares.

Her fate hung upon a thread. If ruin even then had shaved him by he would have



spared her. But ruin drew nearer, and as yet I had no proof.

One day I risked all, my mother's love giving me the courage of despair. I watched till the parcel from the chemist's had been taken up to him ; I waited till he had gone into his study and locked the door, and when he had been there a few minutes I stole quietly along the passage and listened. I heard him undo the package ; I heard him go to his safe, which I had never been able to open, and I heard him return to his desk and uncork a bottle. I had a pair of pointed tweezers in my hand. Noiselessly I inserted them into the keyhole, caught the end of the key that projected from the other side, with an effort of all my strength turned it round, and flung open the door. My prison education again, you see !

The expression on his face as he started and looked up told me all, and springing to the desk I caught up a bottle that stood there open. It was Elsie's medicine. Beside it was a white packet of powder, unmarked, but open also.

" You devil," I cried. " You are murdering her, and I have caught you at last ! "

He is a terrible man. Without even rising from his chair he swung round and

faced me, looking at me for a moment in silence.

"You are a clever woman," he said at last, calmly, "so clever that you are dangerous, and I must get rid of you. Ring that bell."

His tone, his calmness, a look in his eyes frightened me. I am only a woman, and for a moment I stood frozen, dumb, overwhelmed with a sudden terror of what was to come.

"I want the servants to hear what I am going to say to you, before I send for the constable from Windleton and have you arrested," he went on, speaking slowly and calmly. "And this is what I shall tell them. Your name is not Cathcart; it is Belton. You are a convicted murderess, whose sentence was commuted to one of penal servitude for life, at present released on ticket of leave. The crime for which you were sentenced was murder by poisoning. You have obtained a situation in my house under a false name and by the aid of a lady of high position whom you have evidently deceived as to your true character. You are Elsie Grey's mother, and you are commencing your career afresh by a crime more terrible than the one for which you have already suffered. You

are poisoning your own daughter. The proofs are here. I have suspected it for some days. Now I am sure."

Dumbly I stared at him, while my legs trembled under me and my teeth chattered together. "You villain!" I gasped, "why does not heaven strike you dead. It is you, *you* that are the poisoner."

"Who will believe it?" he said. "Which will justice credit—the man whom the world knows and respects, the man who has been for no reward more than a father to her through her life, who has nothing to gain through her death, who loves her and whom she loves, or the convicted murderess who poisoned her husband, who for fifteen years deserted her child, and who gains a fortune of a hundred and fifty thousand pounds by her death."

I reeled back from him in horror. "You liar," I cried, "it is you who gain by her death. I have seen the will she made among your papers."

I saw his eyes flicker, but he never moved an inch. "That will can be destroyed in an instant," he said, quickly. "She signed it without knowing what it was, and she is not even aware of its existence. But why should I argue with you? I have shown you

the strength of my position. Now ring the bell."

I looked at him and pressing my burning hands to my head tried to force my brain to work. It was true what he said, true every word of it. If I rang that bell, or if he called the servants up and told them what he declared he was going to do, I was lost; I could not doubt it. Everything would be against me; the servants disliked me; my dreadful past would rise up to accuse me, while to speak for me there would only be my word against his, the word of a convicted murderess against that of a man of high character and position, universally respected. And not alone should I be lost, but what of Elsie? At the best, her future would be ruined, for she and all the world would know the truth and more than the truth; at the worst I should leave her at his mercy who had determined on her death. Was ever a woman placed between such alternatives before. And still I could not think, still I could not decide. A thousand hammers seemed beating at my brain, and my parched lips opened but uttered no sound.

I looked at him as he sat there, big, red-faced, inflexible, so powerful in body compared to me, so sure of his keen intellect, so

contemptuous of mine ; and I clenched my weak hands. " Oh, if I could kill you where you sit ! " I cried.

" And add a third murder to the other two ? " he said. " No, thank you. But this must end."

And still looking at me fixedly, he rose and moved towards the bell. He passed me ; he had his hand upon the knob, when consciousness returned to me. I sprang to him and seized his hand. " No, no, for God's sake don't ring ! " I cried, wildly, " don't ring ! "

He looked at me sternly. " What then ? " he said.

" Anything. I will do anything you ask, only spare her life, only spare her life ! " and I flung myself on my knees, clutching his hand, begging him to spare my child, praying to him to have mercy.

He let me exhaust myself, and then drew his hand from mine. " Don't be a fool," he said, harshly, at last. " Her life is safe. Here, see ! " and taking the medicine and the packet from the desk he dashed the bottle to pieces on the hearth, and opening the window scattered the powder in the air outside.

I tried to murmur something ; I tried to



speak again, but all was dark before my eyes ; my poor dazed brain refused to act, my wretched body betrayed me, the world seemed to swing round with me, and I sank senseless and helpless to the floor.

When I came round he had gone and I was alone. I flew to Elsie, and found her better and more cheerful than she had been for days. Your visit and Dr. Legrand's had done her good. I heard the news that you had again stepped in, and that a trained nurse was coming at once to watch her. I guessed your intentions and blessed you ; oh, how I blessed you. I felt that you and that kind doctor were watching over her too ; I felt that *he* would dare nothing for the moment, and I should have time to think, to decide what was best.

He never went to bed that night, but spent the hours pacing up and down the lawn. I stood in the corridor outside her door, and watched him through the window. Early in the morning he went to town. He returned about mid-day. He was restless and uneasy, and wandered round the place. I could see he was revolving something in his mind. He saw your nurse when she came and had an interview with her (I neither trust nor like that woman). During the early afternoon

he received two telegrams ; and after the second one he sent for me, and warned me to have the servants and everything ready to travel that night. I asked him where we were going, and he refused to tell me. " You will know to-night," he said. " It is not far. I prefer that no one should know at present. I am not well. I need complete rest from business worries, and a change will also do *her* good."

I looked at him, and he met my gaze calmly and firmly. I went to Elsie, and ventured to ask her if she could tell me, so that I should know what to take and what arrangements to make. She seemed frightened and agitated, and could not say. It was against Mr. Dunn's wish, she said, that the servants should know until we reached our destination. Mr. Dunn was much worried with pressing business matters, and had been ordered complete rest from them. The only way to ensure that was to keep his address unknown as long as possible. Any of the servants who objected to the sudden move could be paid and allowed to go. Two of the maids declined to travel, and left. I saw to the preparations, silent and anxious. Was his explanation the true one, or was he plotting some deeper and baser villainy ? I

was afraid, I was afraid, and I wrote to you.

\* \* \* \*

We arrived here late that night. It is a big, rambling, old-fashioned house, which he has not occupied for some years. It seems gloomy and horrible, and something about it terrified me the first moment I entered it.

For a day I watched ceaselessly, trying to fathom the mystery of this sudden move. He was restless and looked anxious, but I saw nothing to give me cause for fear. I only fancied that he looked at me in a strange way when he met me, and that this look was repeated in some indefinable manner in the new nurse's face, whom I was constantly meeting in the passages, but who never addressed me otherwise than curtly and disagreeably.

. Yesterday I caught them whispering together outside Elsie's room; of *me*, I am sure; and later when I tried to go in and see her, I found the door leading to her apartments closed to me; yet I knew the nurse was walking in the garden. The thought flashed to my mind: the door has been locked to keep me from her! I am not to be allowed to see her alone. Why?

I went to my room and, sitting down, tried to think. I could find no answer to the



question which could satisfy me, and, having assured myself that the nurse had gone to Elsie's apartment for the night, I lay down on my bed to rest a little. And as I lay there the knowledge came to me, came as plainly as if God had sent an angel to whisper it in my ear. Why did the new nurse look askance at me and watch me with that strange look on her face ; why did she lock up Elsie's apartments when she went for a moment to the garden ; why did she whisper about me to *him* ; why had he suddenly brought Elsie and her and me out of reach of your guarding hands, out of sight of the watchful eyes of Dr. Legrand ; why was he restless and sleepless ; why did he meet my eyes with that strange look which simulated suspicion but *was* half fear ? Why ? It came to me in a flash of inspiration, and I sprang from my bed with a cry of fear—

I am writing this here in my room. I shall send it off by the quickest way possible the first thing in the morning. When you receive it, come ! He has brought her here to be out of reach of any possible interruption from you. He is going to finish the devilish work that he has begun, and nothing but a miracle will arrest him, for he can work now with impunity. Not on him, but on me

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the penalty will fall. He has warned the nurse, he has warned Elsie that I am trying to poison her ; I know it. That woman believes it ; I can see it in her face. He has turned your own weapon with an infernal skill against the only person who stands between Elsie and instant death. I shall be kept from her with every open precaution until his plot is ripe ; then the trap will close on me—and *her* !

When will he snap the spring ? What are his plans ? How will they work ? I know not. I cannot even guess. I can only tell you—come !

\* \* \* \* \*

As I finished the letter and read that last word " come," the train glided into a station, a porter called out in hoarse tones the name of " Holmsley Junction," and, looking up, I saw that I was at my journey's end.

## CHAPTER XXIII

**I** GOT out of the train and looked about me for a moment. It was rapidly growing dark, and the little station standing alone in the middle of the gorse-clad moor seemed deserted and gloomy. No one else had left the train here, and save the solitary porter, who appeared to be making off homewards, there was not a soul in sight. There were no traps or vehicles of any kind standing about, nor could I see any building near which looked large enough to be an hotel or inn.

I shouted hastily after the porter. "Can I get a fly or anything to take me to Burley?" I said.

The porter gazed at me and shook his head. "Not now, you can't, sir," he said. "You ought to have telegraphed to Burley for someone to meet the train. No; you won't get nothing here. There ain't no village here-about where you could get a horse and trap; nowhere nearer than Burley village."

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"How far is Burley?" I asked.

"Oh, lor, it ain't far, sir; not more than two miles and a half. Straight over the hill there. Take that road opposite and go on till you come to a sign-post. That tells you where Burley is. You can't miss your way, sir."

I cast a glance over the rapidly darkening moor against which the road pointed out showed up faintly white; then I gave another look round me. Even the porter had disappeared now, and there was nothing for it but to walk. I shouldered my bag and set out.

For a mile or so I was able to follow the road easily enough; then the sky began to grow darker, the outline of the moor and the forest in front of me more obscure, and I hastened my pace, afraid of losing the track altogether.

By and by, where the road branched off, I came upon the sign-post I was eagerly watching for, but it was hardly so enlightening as I had hoped to find it. On one arm which pointed away to the right were written—I saw by the aid of a match—the words "Burley Lawn"; on the other arm, pointing more or less straight on, "Burley." Mrs. Cathcart had given her address as "Tower Park,

Burley." That there were two sorts of Burley's I had not suspected, but I decided for the Burley simple, and strode on.

How or where did I leave the track? I know not, but it was an easy act of accomplishment, for only the open moor bordered the road in places; it was too dark to see the track; and there were no hedges to guide one. I found myself at last stumbling over heather and gorse-roots, with my feet no longer ringing on the hard metal, and my ideas as to the whereabouts of the road I had left behind me absolutely nil.

For a moment or two I only cursed my luck, impatient of any delay which should keep me from Elsie's side and leave her longer exposed to danger; but as I stumbled over the uneven surface of the moor, confused with the darkness, and each moment getting more hopelessly lost, I began to realise the seriousness of the position. The New Forest is, I was aware, but scantily populated; there seemed to be no traffic of any kind about; and at this rate I might go on wandering hopelessly about till morning; and Mrs. Cathcart had relied upon my coming instantly.

Startled, I made a frantic effort to retrieve my position, only to get more hopelessly at sea, for now I found trees on each side of me,

and what little chance I had of catching a glimpse of some cottage light seemed to have disappeared.

I sat down and tried to reckon, from the position of the few stars known to me, the direction in which I must have come ; but occupied as I had been in watching the road I had paid little attention to the heavens, and I found the task difficult. I fancied, however, at last that I formed some idea, and, rising, I struck boldly out.

My theory proved right to a certain extent, for after a long time and much rough walking, I found myself with a considerable amount of gratitude on the high road once more. But my troubles were not over, for whereabouts on the high road I had emerged or which was now the way to Burley I knew no more than the man in the moon ; and as I looked at my watch I saw, to add to my confusion, that it was close upon two hours since I had left Holmsley Station.

Suddenly I caught sight of a little light far away in the distance. As I watched it, it seemed to be moving and to draw nearer to me, now flickering over the surface of the moor, now dodging behind the trees of the Forest ; and then I heard the buzz-buzz of a flying motor.

It was a welcome sound, and I only hoped the driver would not turn off the road before he got to me ; but I need not have feared. He was coming along at a tremendous pace directly towards me, and I only had time to spring into the road and wave my arms before he was upon me.

"Stop, stop! Hi! wait a minute!" I cried.

It was a light car, and the driver pulled up quickly, almost at my feet, and peered over the wheel at me.

"What ees it?" he asked. "'ave I 'urt anybody. If not, do not stop me. I am in a 'urry."

"Good heavens! Joseph!" I cried.

A cry of surprise came from the darkness, and a figure leaped from the machine and seized my hand.

"You, friend Blackwood! Ah, zis ees good. I am very glad. I came as quick as I could after you, according to your letter. Zere was no train for a long, long while, so I came on 'teuf-teuf.' But what 'as 'appened? Why do I find you wandering about 'ere alone at night?"

"I have got lost, like a fool, Joseph," I said. "I arrived more than two hours ago at Holmsley Junction, but I could get no

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vehicle to take me to Burley, and darkness coming on, I strayed from the road."

"I strayed myself, too," said Joseph ; "twice. It is ze deuce of a place zis Forest. Luckily, each time I met someone who put me on my way. But, tell me, now zat I have met you, where are you going ? I was making for ze 'ouse where you told me in your letter Mr. Dunn was staying. Are you still going there ? "

"I was trying to, when I missed my way," I replied. "Thank heaven, I met you, Joseph. I have not wasted so very much time after all. But are you sure of your road yourself ? "

"Yes ; I am sure now. I 'ave asked so often. We are just close by. It should be a little way furzer along on ze left. Zere should be a high wall and zen a big gate. But jump up on ze seat in front and we will look for zem. Zat ees good. And now tell me all zat 'as 'appened and what you are going to do ? "

I acquainted him as briefly as possible with the contents of Mrs. Cathcart's letter and the danger Elsie must be in ; but I had hardly time to complete my story before the powerful light of "teuf-teuf" showed us that we were travelling alongside a high stone



wall, and a moment later a great iron gate came in sight.

Joseph pulled up the car, and I jumped down to investigate. "Tower Park": "tradesmen's entrance." "This is the place, Joseph," I said quickly, reading a notice on the pillars of the gate, "and this entrance will do as well as any other."

Joseph descended and silenced "teuf-teuf," who was, as he called it, "breezing 'ard." "What are you going to do now?" he asked.

I hesitated. "I am going to go up to the house and see Mr. Dunn," I said. "Now that you are here, I shall insist on your being allowed to keep Elsie under your eye until we can communicate with Mr. Prothero, the other trustee, in the morning. Mrs. Cathcart's letter is sufficient excuse for this action, and in any case nothing shall turn me from my determination."

As I spoke, a light gig, driven at a quick pace, came up behind us on the road. It stopped for a moment, and a man by the side of the driver flashed on us for a second the light of a lantern he carried. Then the vehicle drove rapidly on again.

"Come, Joseph," I said; and I entered the gate.

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Joseph moved "teuf-teuf" into a corner of the gateway out of road of the traffic, and followed me.

We did not speak as we made our way up the narrow avenue which was evidently the servants' entrance to the house. It was dark, but as we turned a corner the lights of the building in front shone out on us, and we had no difficulty in finding our way.

At the corner of the house we stopped for a second. "I wonder which ees ze way to ze front," said Joseph.

I pointed to the left. "That side of the house is lighted," I said. "Let us try that way." And, turning, we took a small gravel path that led us under the windows.

The series of rooms we passed opened on to the garden, with French windows reaching to the ground. As we walked along we glanced into the different apartments, and saw that, though illuminated, they seemed to be unoccupied. At the last one, however, Joseph stopped suddenly and, catching my arm, gave a little exclamation.

"Look! see!" he whispered.

I followed the direction of his glance, moved nearer to the window, looked in, and stopped dead.

I shall never forget the view that met my

eyes at that moment, or the strange effect it had upon my brain. My eye took in all the circumstances of the scene before me with a vividness in itself extraordinary ; imprinting the personality, the figures, the expressions of the three people concerned in it with an ineffaceable distinctness on my mind. In a second I realised that we had arrived at the instant of some tragedy which these three people were enacting with an intensity terrible to watch, yet of the import of which we could catch no single word. It seemed almost as if, through the darkness in which we stood outside the window, a scene from some weird biograph had flashed across our vision ; a scene in which the actors moved, suffered, exhibited emotions intense and terrible, yet were dumb and silent as the figures that pass across a screen.

At the side of the room, near an open door, stood Mrs. Cathcart. Her frightfully pale face was drawn with emotion, and her wild black eyes glared with a look of terror and passion I have never seen surpassed. By her side, struggling with her, and holding tightly one of her hands, in which there was a glass, stood the new nurse, her features convulsed with fury. Opposite the two women, with his hand on the wall against

which he had evidently reeled, was Mr. Dunn. His huge form looked rigid and swollen, his heavy face rather purple than red, his thick lips working convulsively.

What had happened? Was it the end? Without a moment's thought I seized the handle of the window, and, tugging at it furiously, opened it and sprang into the room.

My entrance caused everyone to look in my direction; and for an instant we all stood motionless. Then Mr. Dunn, with an effort which was painful to watch, staggered from the wall to the middle of the room, and, pulling himself together, forced his trembling limbs to obey his control once more. He seized my wrist, and with a wild gesture pointed to the still struggling women. "You are just in time, Blackwood," he said hoarsely, but loudly. "That woman has been trying to poison Elsie. The nurse has caught her in the act. You were right about her. I never suspected. I beg your pardon. She is Mrs. Belton—the poisoner. She is Elsie's mother. She poisoned her husband, and she has just attempted foully and brutally to kill her daughter. See! the poison is in her hand."

"He lies; he lies!" cried Mrs. Cathcart

wildly. "He took the poison to her room and put it where he knew she would drink it in the night. This woman, this wretch, was asleep and saw nothing. But *I* was not asleep; I never trusted her. I suspected, and I never ceased to watch; and I saw him take the glass into her room. When I crept in to seize it, and not till then, this woman woke. That is her care! It is thus she does her duty! She woke to see me with the glass in my hand, and now they accuse me—*me*, her mother! But you have got my letter, you are here. Tell them, tell this man to his face you know him for what he is: A villain and a murderer. You know—ah, look at his face!"

I turned, but even as I turned, the half open door of the room by which the two women stood opened wider, there was a quick rush of a white-clad figure, and Elsie reached the broken woman's side.

"Mother! mother!" she cried, and dropped on her knees at the housekeeper's feet, encircling her with her arms, while the nurse, startled, released her hold and stepped backward.

"Mother!" Elsie cried again, in tones whose love and pity struck to my heart; and, rising again, with her arms still round

her mother's waist as if to protect her against the world, she faced us all.

The poor woman, shaken with sobs, clung to the young arms that held her and buried her face in the soft muslin of her daughter's dress. "Ah, you don't believe it," she sobbed. "You don't believe it! But, oh, my dear, I never meant you to know; and now what shall I do?—what shall I do?"

Mr. Dunn took another wavering step towards Elsie. His features were fearfully distorted and his huge chest heaved convulsively.

"Elsie," he began hoarsely; "Elsie"—and stopped, for in her eyes he saw had dawned the knowledge of the truth. Yet the strength of the man was such that he would not yield, and passing his hand across his lips with a force that was almost a blow, he was about to speak again, when a light touch fell on his shoulder, and he turned as if struck by lightning. A man had entered the room silently, and, passing by us unperceived, with incredibly easy and swift motions had reached his side.

"Mr. Dunn; one moment," he said.

In a moment all our eyes were fixed on him; and we watched in breathless silence. He was a heavily-framed, common-looking

man of about forty, in clothes evidently too good for him, but his swift, mysterious arrival, and something in his air of quiet but unlimited power made him in an instant the centre of our thoughts.

"Excuse me, ladies and gents," he said, looking round us, "it ain't my fault. I must have a word with Mr. Dunn here."

I saw what was coming, and tried to get to Elsie, but even as I moved Mr. Dunn recovered from the paralysis that had seized him on the man's first touch. But his face was now white instead of purple, and he looked like a man already dead. "What does this mean?" he said, thickly. "It can't have come so soon."

The man nodded slowly. "It has," he said. "It wouldn't have been for a week or two, but—something else was brought against you, and under those circumstances things were hurried on a bit. Here's my warrant. Shall I read it?"

"Wait a moment. I want to speak to my ward," said Mr. Dunn, in such a natural tone that we all started and stared at him, and he walked to Elsie's side. As he almost reached her he made a swift turn to the nurse, and before she had time to resist he seized the poison glass from her hand and raised it to his lips.

We were all too slow to dash it from his hand ere he had drunk it, but slowest of all, to my surprise, was the man of the swift, easy movements, who stumbled and fell heavily to his knee, and only rose as Mr. Dunn with a shuddering cry dropped the empty glass to the ground.

Joseph and I sprang to the unfortunate man, but convulsively he wrested himself from our hands, and fell at Elsie's feet. "Forgive me ; forgive me," he gasped. "Ah, my God, and I meant this for you—for you—Oh ! I am a dead man——" and he fell writhing on the floor.

"Yes, 'e is dead," whispered Joseph, hiding the livid face and widely-dilated eyes from Elsie's sight, "Eet is cyanide of potassium—a terrible dose. Yes, see ! 'e ees dead, poor man."

\* \* \* \*

When hours had passed, and we could think once more ; when Elsie and her mother were closeted together with tight-closed doors, and Joseph and I had done all that could be done for the lifeless body of the great financier, we heard the truth.

The blow that had fallen on the poor wretch who lay dead at our feet, had been long expected by him, but Elsie's death might have



averted it. Whatever of fraud there had been in his hunted twistings and turnings of late could have been hushed up by means of Elsie's money, and this money he might have had if his schemes had not failed. If it had not been for her mother, my darling would have been lying dead where he now lay, and but for my visit to Mr. Prothero and the steps my information gave him the impulse to take, who knows in which direction the law might not have looked for the guilty person. He had never suspected that that poor woman and I were in communication, but he had guessed from the nurse's appearance that there was danger in committing the last act of the crime in our neighbourhood. With an infernal skill he had taken his household to Burley, and turned our own weapon, the nurse, to his service. Had I not come on the scene, had the warrant not arrived, he would have fought and, I believe, won. He had turned the nurse's suspicions against Elsie's unfortunate mother, and the woman, catching her with the poison in her hand, would have been a deadly witness. For months he had been slowly poisoning my darling. Had fear made him delay the blow, or was Mrs. Cathcart right, and had he hoped till the last that his failing fortunes would mend and save

him from the crime ? Who can say. The end came ; hunted and desperate, he turned to bay. The poor woman's discovery of the means by which he tampered with Elsie's medicine, and her accusation, had forced his hand, and shown him the way to the immediate realisation of his scheme and subsequent safety. I believe, though we can never know, that this scheme had grown into his mind from the day when I first informed him of Mrs. Cathcart's real character ; for we discovered afterwards that Lady Rexworth, appealed to by him, had been obliged to tell him who the poor woman really was. The change of poison from the deadly, but slowly administered irritant to the cyanide poor Elsie's mother had used years before, was but another fiendishly clever move suggested by the circumstances.

Poor wretch, he saved us much pain by his death, perhaps much danger, for had he lived who knows whether his nature might not once again have gained the upper hand, and he turned on us with his back against the wall. And he might not have died. Neither Joseph or myself could have reached him, so quick were his actions, in time to prevent him drinking the fatal dose ; but as to that quiet, swift man who stood at his side, I have always had

my doubts. "It's a funny thing I stumbled just then, sir," he said to me afterwards, "I've never known it to happen before. But perhaps it is as well. It would have been a pity to see a man like that in the dock. And there would have been some in high places who would have been sorry to see him there, too."

## CHAPTER XXIV

**A**ND Elsie was saved. Our first long sweet talk, my joy at knowing she was spared to me, are too sacred to put down here, even in this record which has been kept so scrupulously. But how I shook Joseph's firm hand, as he told me that I could brush that dark shadow for ever from my mind; that Elsie's strong constitution would quickly recover from the effects of the deadly irritant, and that I could look forward to a future as bright as any I had dreamed at first.

"I was a fool not to see zat she was ill as quick as you did," he said; "But on ze uzzer 'and, I told you what a constitution was wrapt up in zat pretty body. Well, zat constitution will 'ave its own way now, and you will see 'ow quick it pulls 'er round. No, I am not frightened for 'er; she ees well again already; it ees ze uzzer one I fear for—'er muzzer. She frightens me bad. She is not well; she never has been since I knew 'er; but now—well, I do not like ze look of sings at all. And she is strange, too. It ees true she was always zat; but now——" he tapped his forehead,

"I do not like it, friend Blackwood ; no, I do not like it."

He was right ; and as I watched Elsie's mother, I soon realised the force of what he said. After her long interview with Elsie—an interview of which even my darling has never given me a full account, but which must have meant so much to both—the poor woman retired to her room where she remained shut up for many hours at a time. Though Elsie was kindness and gentleness itself to her, she shunned her almost as obstinately as she avoided Joseph and myself, and when accident did throw her in our way, I saw that the strange characteristics which had separated her so painfully from all around her had developed with startling rapidity. Her timidity when spoken to ; the terror in her great dark eyes ; her haunted, beaten look, were all more marked ; and while her devotion to my darling was stronger than ever, she fled from her now constantly, or sat silent and ill at ease in her presence.

For two days after the removal of Mr. Dunn's body, we did our best with gentleness and tact to soothe and calm her ; on the third, the end came.

I was smoking with Joseph on the lawn after breakfast, when Elsie came running to

meet us down the path. She was agitated and tears were in her eyes, while in her hand she held a letter crumpled and blotted.

"Oh, Arthur, Arthur, she has gone," she cried, "What shall I do? She has gone!"

"Who has gone, Elsie," I asked, startled, "What has happened?"

"My mother, my poor, poor mother. But read this, Arthur."

I took the letter and read it silently, thinking, as I did so, of the last one I had received from the writer, and how it had saved my darling's life.

"My love," it commenced, "oh, my dear, dear daughter, it could not be; I knew it could not be—Heaven would not permit it, and Heaven is right. God has already done so much more for me than I ever could have hoped or dreamed. I have seen you, darling, my lovely, innocent child, and you—oh, you haven't hated me, or cursed me, or sent me from you. And I have helped to save your life. In all the long and miserable night which has just broken for me, in all the weary fifteen years which were really but one thought of you, I never hoped, I never dreamed that so much could possibly be granted me. Oh, my prayer was answered; oh, that kind, good man who made me pray! My darling you

were too gentle, too sweet, and the devil tempted me, and for two days I have fought with him. He said, 'stay, stay with her ; and be at rest and happy, poor hunted soul, in her forgiving love ; you have sinned ; but you have suffered, and now you shall have peace.' Ah, darling, it was frightful, but I remembered how I prayed and how my prayer was answered, and I conquered the temptation ; and now while I have strength I am flying from it ; I am leaving you for ever. Be happy with the husband you are going to wed ; he will be good to you, I feel it. Never weep for your mother, darling ; only remember that she loved you and would die rather than bring an instant's shadow to your sweet and gentle face. I can write no more, the tears drop so fast upon the paper. Pray for me, Elsie, pray that I may have peace. Good-bye, my darling ; oh, good-bye, my love, my love. Let me sign myself for once, just once—your mother."

"And she has gone ?" I said.

"Yes ; last night, or early this morning, before the house was up. It is impossible to say when. No one knows ; no one saw her go. Oh, Arthur, I am frightened. I do not think she has much money. Where can she have gone ?"

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I thought for a moment. "It is difficult to say," I said, at last. "But there is one possibility. Where does Lady Rexworth live?"

"On Southampton Water; in her old home. Her people are dead, you know, and she has the house."

"Then there are ten chances to one that she has gone there," I said; "Either there, or to—the chaplain she speaks of. But Lady Rexworth must be the first person to try. Tell me, has she taken anything with her—any luggage?"

"Nothing, I think. She seems to have gone just as she was in her house-dress. I cannot think that she has even a cloak or wrap with her, and the night was cold. Oh, Arthur, help me; ah, why did she go!"

"Rely on me, dearest, and don't be afraid," I said, seeing that she was almost breaking down. "She cannot have gone far, and it will be easy to trace her in the Forest. I will find her and bring her back to you before night-fall, I promise you. There, darling, go indoors, and try to bear the waiting, while Joseph and I do all we can. It shall not be long, I promise you."

She yielded, and seeing her into the house again, I had a moment's chat with Joseph.

"We will take 'teuf-teuf'" he said, "and we



will catch zat poor wandering woman as quick as quick. She cannot 'ave gone very far, not even if she left in ze middle of ze night, for she would lose her way in zis confusing Forest. And 'teuf-teuf' is quick ; you do not know 'ow quick. We will go and see 'im, and we will start at once, And as we go we will make inquiries on our route."

\* \* \* \*

Joseph had said that " teuf-teuf " was quick : that I did not know how quick he was. He was right, I had no idea ; but I soon obtained one. Never shall I forget the wild nightmare of that drive. I had been too fond of horses ever to have experienced any desire for a motor, and I had never accepted my friends' offers to drive in theirs. Probably for that reason, therefore, and partly owing to the lowness and lightness of " teuf-teuf " our speed seemed greater than it really was ; but it is quite certain, in any case, that it was great enough to be perfectly reckless, and to ensure anyone but Joseph, and even him in a strange country, a verdict of manslaughter in case of a fatal accident. And the number of fatal accidents we narrowly escaped was really marvellous considering the scanty population of the Forest. I seemed, on my little low front seat, to be continually pushing startled

men and women aside, assisting them by the merest matter of hair-breadths to escape our flying wheels, shouting wildly to deaf and weary cattle, or receiving in my face the sharp metal flung from the roads by the heels of terrified and fleeing Forest ponies. And through it all, to the rhythm of "teuf-teuf's" whirring and furious engine, the nape of my neck fanned by Joseph's hot breath, my eyes red and staring, I jolted, bumped, rattled along on my tiny perch, like a bullet on an agitated tea-tray.

I am not a coward, I think, for I ride as straight as another to hounds, but I must confess that I experienced a sense of relief when Joseph pulled up at Holmsley Station and we took our first breather to inquire there if anything had been seen of the woman we were pursuing. "Aren't you making the pace a bit hot, Joseph?" I said, tentatively, as I descended—six inches—to the ground.

"Ah, you sink 'e goes well, eh?" that gentleman returned, beaming and rubbing his hands. "Wait; just wait. You will zee better zan zat. Ze spark is not quite right yet. Ah, eet ees necessary to go fast, friend Blackwood. I sink of zat poor woman; I see 'er face, 'er great black eyes, 'er strange ways, and—and I fear, I do not know what.

But let me ask what zay 'ave seen 'ere."

We soon discovered that we had made a fortunate commencement by calling first at the station, for there we met with a surprise. A woman; undoubtedly Elsie's mother, from the description given us, had been there a few hours previously, and had taken a ticket for Hinton Admiral, in the opposite direction to Southampton, and she had left half an hour afterwards by the first train.

Then she was not going to Lady Rexworth, apparently, nor to the prison, which was the second possibility I had thought of.

"Hinton Admiral ees six miles from 'ere," said Joseph. "Let us not waste time. Come, 'teuf-teuf,' off we go again."

I climbed resignedly on to my perch, and the journey recommenced.

On this occasion we had to halt after a few miles to tighten a nut and bolt which threatened to shake loose, which we only succeeded in arranging after some considerable amount of time and labour; and we were delayed again later by a slight collision with a cow. But we reached Hinton Admiral at last, and wasted no time in commencing our inquiries afresh. We met with small success, however, and it was already well on in the day before we again obtained any news of the woman

we sought. One of the porters at the station had indeed noticed her leave the train ; and had seen the direction she took afterwards ; but from that moment she seemed to have vanished, swallowed up in the unaccustomed traffic of a neighbouring market day.

For hours we wandered round the little town and its outskirts, questioning everyone we met, and causing much interest in our appearance and turn-out, but only to meet with disappointment.

"Oh, zis ees terrible," said Joseph, at length, sinking back on his small, hard seat, disheartened. "Zat woman she 'as 'ad nussing to eat ; she 'as not stopped to drink ; she seems to 'ave asked 'er way of no one, and she 'as disappeared as if she 'ad sunk into ze sea. Where ees she ; what 'as she done ; where 'as she gone ?"

I looked round us. We were on a lonely country road, some distance outside the town, with not a soul in sight. "Who can tell ?" I said, disconsolately, at last. "We seem to have asked at every house in the neighbourhood and we have certainly questioned most of the inhabitants. Still we must find her. I will never return to Elsie without news. Heaven grant it may be good."

Joseph nodded and wiped some dust from

"teuf-teuf." "Amen," he said. "But who comes here."

I followed the direction of his gaze and saw a man approaching us rapidly on horseback.

As he drew near, we could see that he was a groom mounted on a good horse.

He pulled up as he reached us.

"Beg your pardon, sir," he said to me; "do you happen to have seen anything of a woman—a lady on this road lately, well, it might be an hour ago, it might be more. A lady without a hat or coat, and a little wild-looking like?"

Joseph and I exchanged a glance. "No, we have not," I replied. "To tell the truth, we were looking for some one answering to that description ourselves."

"Well, she must have come this way not an hour and a half ago," said the man. "She was up at my Lady Rexworth's at Dilton within that time, and asking for my lady. But my lady was away at Southampton Water as we thought, and we told the lady so. However, not long after she had gone my lady arrived unexpected like in the motor-car. When she heard the lady had been and gone she was much upset, and set off right and left to try and catch her. The lady must have gone back to the station though; there's

no other way for it. Thank you, sir. I'll make for there."

We watched the man gallop off, and then I turned to Joseph.

"She did come to see Lady Rexworth, after all," I said. "She has missed her here, and now she will go back to Southampton. That man is right; she must have returned to the station. The porter who saw her leave missed her probably when she returned, and we did not ask the others. When does the next train leave?"

I took out my time-table and looked at it. The last train for Southampton had left half an hour before; the next went in two hours. We hurried back to the station, only to meet the groom returning.

"She's gone to Southampton, gentlemen," he said, in answer to our inquiries; "she left by the five-thirty. I am going back to inform her ladyship."

"She will miss Lady Rexworth again at Southampton, Joseph," I said as the man went off. "What will she do?"

"She will break down, in the state she must be in," said Joseph; "but we may save her yet. If teuf-teuf do not break down, too, we can get there quicker than by waiting for the train. Come, it is ze only way."

## CHAPTER XXV

"SHE will go to Southampton, and zen take ze ferry across to Hythe," said Joseph, in my ear, as we continued our furious journey through the Forest. "It ees 'er best way. But we shall go by road through Beaulieu, and we shall not be very far behind. Pray zat 'teuf-teuf' do not give in before we get zere. I do not like ze look of zat nut and bolt at all, friend Blackwood ; I do not like 'im at all."

I glanced out of the corner of my eye at the weak spot in 'teuf-teuf's' economy, and clenched my teeth in silence. What depended on our reaching Lady Rexworth's quickly, I hardly dared to think ; I could only remember the skill and resource of our wild charioteer, and trust to Providence.

And for a long time all went well. The road we were now taking seemed more deserted than that which had taken us to Hinton Admiral ; we had fewer of the miraculous escapes which had characterized

the first part of our journey; and Joseph drove with wonderful certainty. We were already almost within sight of Lady Rexworth's house, when an exclamation from my companion startled me from my thoughts.

We had reached the edge of a long and very steep descent, at the bottom of which, we had been informed, lay the turning that led to Lady Rexworth's estate. Our pace was considerable for such a hill, yet it was no surprise to me, after my day's experience, that Joseph did not slacken speed. When, however, after a second or two we began to go still faster, and I heard him breathing hard, and fumbling with the levers, I looked round.

"Anything wrong, Joseph?" I asked.

He looked up with rather a scared face. "We are going too fast," he said. And as he spoke the little car began to leap and bound like a living thing down the long descent.

"This time, at least, we certainly are," I returned, clinging on, as a lurch nearly threw me into the road. "Put the brake on, man, or we shall be smashed for a certainty."

He made another furious attempt, and looked at me helplessly. "It ees on," he



said calmly. "But it do not work ; and zat bolt 'e 'as fallen out, too, and I cannot stop 'im. But do not be afraid, it 'as 'appened to me before. Allo, where are we going ?"

I had no time to answer him even if I had known, for as I turned to look at the road it seemed to rise up suddenly to meet me ; there was a frightful swerve, a crash, a flight through the air, and I knew no more.

When I came to myself I was lying on the grass by the side of the road, with a coat under my head and a damp bandage covering my forehead and one of my eyes.

I raised myself to my elbow, and looked round me in the fast-gathering dusk. Ten yards away Joseph, covered with mud and in his shirt-sleeves, laboured heavily over teuf-teuf, who lay upside-down in the ditch.

He looked up as he heard me move, and came to me. "Aha, 'ere you are round again," he said cheerfully. "Zere ees nussing very bad, is zere ; nussing broken ? I sought not."

"No, I am all right," I said. "Only a little shaken for a minute. I see you did me up. And you ?"

"I am not 'urt. I fell in ze 'edge. It prick a little, but zat is all. I saw to you, and bandaged you as well as I could, and

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zen I went to 'teuf-teuf.' Ah, friend Blackwood, 'teuf-teuf'!"

I staggered to my feet, shook myself, and walked with him to our prostrate chariot. A glance at the shattered object and Joseph's dejected face soon told me the truth.

"It is no use, Joseph," I said. "There is nothing to be done to it. But we are not far now. We must leave it here and walk."

Joseph sighed. "And 'e carried us so well," he said. "But zat poor woman . . . yes, I suppose we must leave 'im. Come, we will walk."

The distance was less than we had expected, and in a few minutes we were at the entrance to Lady Rexworth's park. We had no need to continue our journey to the house, for at the first lodge we stopped at we had news.

The woman we sought had called there not half an hour before. On being informed that Lady Rexworth had left in her car, and would not return for some days, she had momentarily broken down. Recovering herself after a time, however, she had declined any refreshment or assistance, and had gone on her way again.

She had not said where she was going, but the lodge-keeper, struck by her distress

and agitated manner, had followed her cautiously to the furthest boundary of the estate, and watched her for some distance along the Hythe Road.

Joseph and I deliberated a moment, after thanking the man and making our way on to the high road.

"She may be going back to Southampton again, and thence to Hinton Admiral, though it is so late," I said.

"Eet ees possible," said Joseph. "At all events, we shall find out at Hythe. Let us hasten on. She is not far in front of us zis time."

But our journey was almost ended. A mile or so before reaching Hythe we came to a turning where the road divided. It was now almost dark, but a sign-post, still easily discipherable, pointed our way straight on. It left, however, the second road unnamed, and down this for a moment Joseph and I, impelled by the same instinct, stopped and gazed.

It was a narrow and deserted thoroughfare, bordered by low hedges. It ran through the marshy, barren land that borders Southampton Water at this part down to the sea, where, so far as we could discern, after several windings, it ended abruptly.

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It looked lonely and forbidding enough in the evening light, this deserted track, and we were about to move on and leave it behind us, when suddenly I caught Joseph's arm. For round one of its windings, up from the distant water, came a figure walking swiftly towards us.

For a second an appearance of wildness and of something unusual about this new arrival made us both start and watch him fixedly as he approached us. He was apparently a young man, hatless and shoeless, dressed in ragged, almost white clothes, and who gesticulated as he walked. And then, as he drew nearer and we marked the vacancy of his countenance, his thick cleft under-lip, the loose meaningless gestures of his long, hanging arms, we understood, and a little pityingly drew aside to let him pass.

"Zere ees one of zose in every English village," whispered Joseph sadly in my ear, "and in every French one too. Zere ees somesing wrong zat it should be so, but, being so, zey should be killed, poor zings, killed young. But. listen, what is zat 'e says? Ees it a song, or what?"

We listened. It was not a song that the poor wretch's lips muttered over and over with meaningless reiteration, but a sen-

tence ; and as the words, almost chanted, reached our ears for the first time clearly, we started again, and looked at one another.

"She gave me three and ninepence, and wished me good-night, ha, ha !" "She gave me three and ninepence, and wished me good-night, ha, ha !" and on again, and over again, until he had passed us with an uncouth bow, and gone his way into the rapidly gathering night.

And then I sprang forward after him, and caught him by the arm, a sudden idea taking possession of me.

"Who is down that road ?" I asked quickly. "What have you seen ?"

The poor wretch raised his vacant eyes to mine. "She gave me three and ninepence, and wished me good-night, ha, ha ! She gave me . . . down there ? Who ? Why, the lady with the white face and the big eyes that fritted me. She gave me three——"

"When ? When did she give it you ? How long ago ? And where is she now ?"

He looked over his shoulder and pointed loosely down the road to the sea. "Just now—there," he muttered, edging away a little from my eager hold on his arm. "There, down by the sea. But she did give it me ;

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ask her else. 'It's all I've got,' her says, 'and it ain't no use to me. Take it, and good-night,' her says. Let me go, will you? I ain't done no 'arm."

And struggling from my grasp, he continued his uneven way. As his footsteps died away we could still hear the burden of his chant as he took it up again: "She gave me three and ninepence, and wished me good-night, ha, ha!"

The sound came back queerly in the lonely shadows round us, and for a second, chilled by the same thought, Joseph and I stood looking after him. Then I turned towards the road that led down to the sea, and caught Joseph by the arm. "It was all she had, and she did not want it," I said quickly. "And she is down there by the sea alone! Come, Joseph, or we shall be too late even now!"

We darted down the road, stepping carefully as we went, while the deserted land on each side grew more barren and marshy with every step we took, and the low, slimy shore in front rose up to meet us with its shallow and dismal pools.

As the road ran on, the hedges at last disappeared, choked by the salt and seaweed, and the track widened out, till at last,

stumbling and sinking deep in the muddy ooze, we reached the shore.

For a moment we looked round us, listening intently, and I, at least, shuddered as I looked. The tide was out, and apparently at its lowest, and before us and on each side stretched the black and slimy waste, with only here and there the mouldering skeleton of some wreck or rock covered with seaweed to break its dull and monotonous silence. In front of us, running apparently right down to the sea, whose waters shone faintly from the distance, stretched a great iron drain or sewer pipe, its surface covered with mussels and green slime.

"She has gone," I said.

"She has not," said Joseph, peering into the darkness. "She is zere; out zere on ze pipe."

It was true. I followed the direction of his gaze, and as my eyes gradually pierced the darkness, I could see, faintly outlined against the dull sky, the waters of the incoming tide already lapping against her knees, the grey figure of the woman we sought. She had walked along the pipe until she reached the water, and resting for a moment, she stood there poised between sky and sea.

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"Thank Heaven we are not too late, Joseph," I said. "Wait here; I will go to her."

Covered as it was with slime and oily mud the pipe was difficult to walk along, and the caution I had to observe to avoid attracting the poor woman's attention made my progress slower still. The tide was coming in rapidly now, and before I had covered half the distance I saw that in another few moments I should have been too late. Slipping and staggering along, for I could no longer see my feet, I kept my eyes fixed breathlessly upon the figure in front, and I saw her move at last, hesitate an instant, and then walk forward till the water reached high above her waist.

Desperate and risking everything to stop her for an instant, I called out to her, and the halt and half turn she made gave me time to reach her side.

"Stop!" I cried. "For Elsie's sake, come back!" and I caught her sleeve.

She struggled violently with wild, startled eyes, and tried to fling herself into the water; but I held on, and step by step I drew her back.

I could hear Joseph shouting and making his way towards us; I fancied I already felt



her resistance failing, when, making a sudden effort, she threw me off my balance, snatched her arm from me, and leaped far out into the water. I staggered, held on for a moment, and followed her. But in falling I must have struck my head against some projection from the pipe, or I had been more hurt than I knew in 'teuf-teuf's' *débâcle* for I rose dazed and half-stunned, and attempting to strike out in the direction in which Mrs. Cathcart had plunged, I sank down, down, and the waves closed over me.

## CHAPTER XXVI

**I** AM going to marry Elsie to-morrow. The long days of doubt and fear are gone for ever, and only sunshine and happiness await us now. The need to keep this record exists no longer, thank Heaven for that, and I shall end it here. Yet I shall not destroy it, for in it are recalled some of the happiest, as well as some of the saddest, days of all my life. Yes, I shall keep it, and some day Elsie and I will read it through together, and she will know, not better how I loved her, but how during all that time she occupied my thoughts, how my life was intertwined with hers.

But to complete the story there is still a little more to add.

In the disaster to 'teuf-teuf' I had been more injured than either Joseph or I had imagined at the time, and I suppose the terrible anxiety I had suffered for Elsie's sake had acted on me too. When I had any clear knowledge of what was happening

again, I found myself in bed in my own home, with Joseph busily engaged in taking my temperature.

"Eet ees normal," he said calmly, as I looked up and met his gaze. "And you are going on very well. Good morning, 'ow do you do?"

"Well, I really hardly know," I replied. "I will take your word for it that I am going on very well. But if you will kindly tell me what all this means, and why I. . . . Good God, Joseph, Mrs. Cathcart, what happened to her? And Elsie? I have just remembered."

"Do not worry yourself," said Joseph soothingly; "eet ees bad for your 'ead. Zat that poor woman is dead. Eet ees better so. She was drowned. Eet was dark, and I am not a good swimmer. I pulled you out, but I could not save 'er, and no 'elp came. 'Teuf-teuf' 'e give you a bad concussion, and ze water it made it worse. Zere was danger for a day or so, now you are all right. Mees Grey, zat charming girl, she is as well as well. She could carry you round ze room in zose pretty young arms of 'ers. She will be glad zat you can talk again; she 'as 'elped to nurse you so well, so well."

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"Helped to nurse me! Where is she then, Joseph?"

"Where ees she? Over ze way."

"Over the way. She has returned there."

"Why, where else should she go? And besides, she wanted, I sink, to be near you, you see. I sink you are a lucky man, friend Blackwood."

"Oh, Joseph, send for her; let me see her!"

He walked to the window and looked out.

"She ees zere, in ze garden," he said.

"She looks sad, poor young sing. It ees not good for pretty, young girls to look sad. I sink I will change that. I sink I will wave my 'and, so! Aha, she looks up; she understands. I sink she is coming, friend Blackwood, I sink she is coming. Now smooze your 'air and look nice, and you shall talk to her for exactly ten minutes."

I heard her step upon the stairs; I heard the handle of the door turn; I heard her voice—and she was in my arms.

What we said, what nonsense I talked, whether we laughed or wept, or sat silent, holding each other's hands, I hardly know. I only feel assured that Joseph's ten minutes were cut shamefully short, and that it could not in reality have been more than a few

seconds before he re-entered the room, and calmly drew Elsie away to the window, where he made her take a chair. "Sit zere, young lady," he said, "and do not talk any more. We do not want our patient to get 'is 'ead buzzled worse again."

"I am sorry," said Elsie submissively. "I will do anything you tell me, Dr. Le-grand, for you have saved his life."

"No, eet ees you who 'ave saved 'is life, you nursed him so well. Do not go and spoil 'im now. Yes, you saved 'is life, and 'e saved yours, and I, ze doctor, am zealous of you bese. And so I shall let you sit and look at one annuzzer, but not talk, for a little while longer, and zen I shall send you away. But to-morrow you shall come again a little, and ze next day a little more, and zen 'e will be quite well, and zen—ah, youth, youth, can't you understand why ze old doctor ees jealous—zen you are going to be very 'appy, and forget everysing, even ze old doctor 'imself. An 'e, ah, eet ees sad, 'e will mend up 'is old 'teuf-teuf,' and go 'is old way; and when you pass 'im by, so 'appy in your carriage, you will say, "'Oo is zat old sing 'oo wave 'is 'and?' and 'e will say, 'Zat ees ze old fool 'oo nearly broke my neck,' and zen you will

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laugh and go on, and sink no more of 'im. And ze poor old doctor 'e will give a sigh and sink, 'Once I was young and 'appy too, and zere was a sweet, pretty girl 'oo cried when I was ill, but something came, and it ended my life just where yours ees beginning; and now I am a leetle dam country doctor, and I 'ave my leetle 'ouse, and my books, and my 'teuf-teuf,' and I go on living because eet ees so many, many years ago now, and I don't know no better. and I am content. Deesgoosting!"

THE END

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